

# THE Christian CENTURY

*Thinking Critically, Living Faithfully*



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## From the publisher

Peter W. Marty

### The gospel for Trump

I have never conducted a survey of individual political preferences within my congregation. Yet after years of knowing these people, I believe that a 55/45 Democrat/Republican party split is a pretty accurate estimate. Many of my good friends told me they were eager to vote for Donald Trump, although they didn't gain that enthusiasm from me. The gospel we preach has zero tolerance for bigoted speech or contempt for the weak, and no taste for vile conspiracy theories that promote fear. Xenophobic sympathies have no place either.

The morning after Trump's victory, church members began calling and e-mailing me for my reaction to the election. Could Trump realistically be the president of all the people whose fundamental human worth he has regularly insulted? Yes, that was possible, I suggested. I believe that hope consists of things unseen. I recognize that faith calls us to pray for reconciliation. But still, they persisted, could this man with a disordered personality, known for vindictiveness and a lack of empathy, not to mention an obsession with conquest and domination—could he be a president for *all* the people?

I admitted to some suspicion over Trump's victory being pegged to people angry at globalization or at Washington's elite messing with their lives. Surely there are reasons why a broad coalition of white voters were drawn to Trump's fixation with the birther controversy and his disdain for immigrant and Muslim peoples. Does racism or "celebrated whiteness" still linger as our nation's original sin?

In *The End of White Christian America*, Robert P. Jones names the anxieties felt by a majority of white Americans who believe that our nation's culture and way of life have changed for the worse in the last 60 years. In the minds of many, America's whiteness is worryingly slipping away.

When a parent of mixed-race kids e-mailed me the day after the election, I knew it was time for a Christian response to the election of Trump. "It's a difficult day for Aron and Jordan and their friends of color at middle school," this parent wrote. "They're feeling vulnerable and scared today. If you see them at confirmation tonight, I'd appreciate you letting them know that you value them. They could use a little reassurance."

That's all I needed to begin assembling some Christian convictions to share with friends appalled by, or thrilled with, Trump's victory. Practice the beatitudes of Jesus and you'll never be tempted to bully. Speak truth to power. Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Weak and vulnerable people need our embrace, not our mockery. Let's welcome the stranger, build bridges of hospitality, and cherish grace. Remember that once you speak a word, it's impossible to unspeak it. Resist fear. Insist on extending hope to others. Never view yourself as above forgiveness.

Were our president-elect to request a personal copy of these admonitions, I'd include one more: "Mr. Trump," I'd write, "Please look for a new Bible verse to serve as your favorite. 'An eye for an eye' just doesn't cut it. Did you know that Jesus' whole life was a repudiation of vengeance? Well, the good news is that yours can be too."

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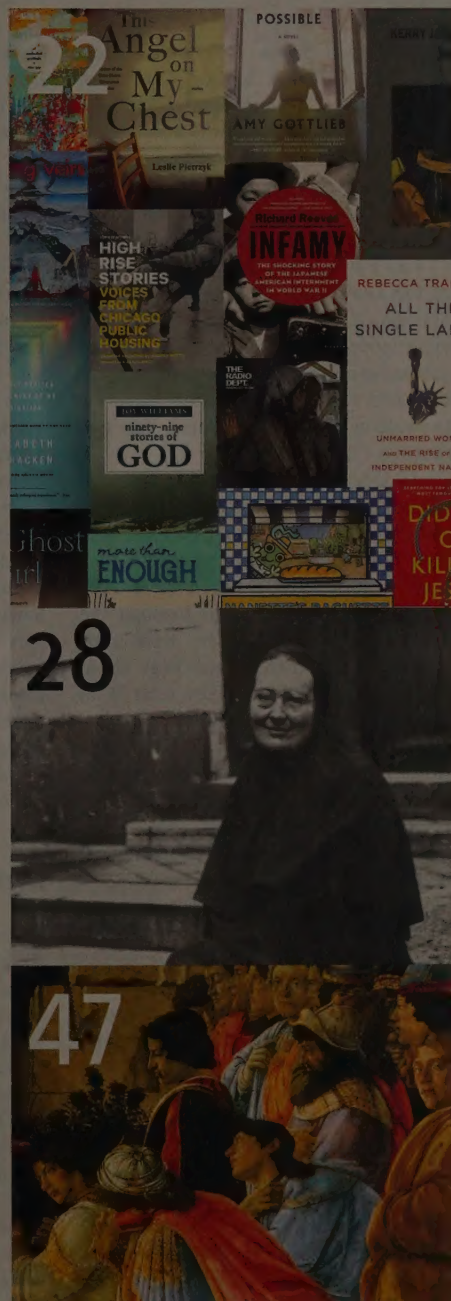
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## Evangelical and liberal

I enjoyed Jason Byassee's article about Hillhurst United Church of Canada ("Evangelically liberal," Nov. 9), but wonder about this statement of his: "Mainline and evangelical churches in both the United States and in Canada seem to agree on one thing: gay-inclusive churches don't grow."

Has anyone has done a good study of this question? That conclusion does not match my (admittedly anecdotal) experience. I have seen a lot of congregations grow significantly in both numbers and spirit after formally deciding to welcome LGBTQ people, for two reasons.

As Byassee's informants at Hillhurst suggest, there are a lot of people, especially young heterosexual parents, who seek out inclusive places because they want to raise their children there. And the congregations that go through the process of deciding to be welcoming have to talk and think and pray about who they are and why they exist. That process revitalizes churches.

Perhaps the churches I have seen were predisposed to be welcoming and did not experience significant conflict because of that decision. This seems like a question ripe for sociological investigation.

*Daniel Sack*

*Washington, D.C.*

Byassee refers to a United Church of Canada minister, Gretta Vosper, "whose denunciations of the deity would seem to make her like a scientist who doesn't believe in the periodic table." The fallacy here is comparing belief (with all its contradictions and unproven and conflicting and unresolved assumptions) with a structure of reliable, proven facts of great predictive power, for which a Nobel Prize was awarded. Theologians should have the courage to say that much of what they preach is belief and not fact. This would put the controversy

about Vosper in very different and true light.

*Fred Lautenschlaeger*

*christiancentury.org comment*

### Ministry and addiction . . .

I really appreciated Adam Hearlson's article about churches and the crisis of opioid addiction ("Facing the opioid crisis," Nov. 9). It appeared, however, that the ministers featured in the article didn't actually attend twelve-step recovery meetings themselves. I find this disappointing. Ministers could benefit from attending open twelve-step meetings in their churches at which they are neither expert nor spiritual guru.

Most church leaders are not good at sitting, listening, and surrendering—about the only things that are required to be part of a recovery community. Beyond hosting recovery meetings and making the attendees feel welcome, church folks ought to consider humbling themselves enough to walk in and listen.

*Stephen R. Haynes*

*christiancentury.org comment*

### Truth telling . . .

Peter W. Marty's article "The truth about lies" (Nov. 9) is well written as usual, but has raised some issues for me: What are the lies we should confess? And to whom should these lies be confessed?

Being a pastor, I find myself lying a lot. The truth or the truth as I see it would be destructive of another person's well-being. Identifying lies is not that easy. We are very clever at absolving ourselves when sin is much deeper and broader than we like to think.

To whom do we confess? I recall at seminary how a student who was guilty of getting his girlfriend pregnant had to

stand before the student body in chapel and confess to what was seen as a sin against the community. Was it good for him, or for us, or for anyone?

God, being omniscient, is aware of our sin by thought, word, and deed. We confess because it is good for our ego—it keeps us humble, I would hope. Confession can restore relationships. But there are circumstances in which it doesn't.

*Ron Spears*

*Waterloo, Iowa*

Thanks for "The truth about lies," particularly for the citations. One more reference immediately comes to mind: *On Bullshit*, by Harry G. Frankfurt. This short but serious philosophical paper was meaningful to me as a pastor struggling with the tensions between worship leadership as an act of self-emptying and as a self-elevating "performance." Frankfurt's working definition of bullshit, "deliberate misrepresentation," hits a resounding chord following the election.

*B. David Williams*

*Mercer Island, Wash.*

### Welcome to prisoners . . .

Thanks to Chris Hoke for "A church for every prisoner" (Oct. 26). I've lived in a Louisiana prison for twelve years due to very selfish choices. I am blessed to have a United Methodist minister walking with me and my family through this journey. He sat with my family at court hearings, wrote letters, gave me this excellent magazine. Jesus has loved and changed me through his faithful service.

If more people welcomed and helped people coming out of prison, it would save souls, strengthen families, lower crime, and revitalize churches.

*Jonathan Dagenhart*

*Homer, La.*



December 7, 2016

## In a divided nation

**R**arely has a presidential election exposed such deep divisions. Supporters of Hillary Clinton awoke the day after the election feeling like exiles in their own land. Many of them—especially blacks, women, Jews, Latinos, Muslims, immigrants, LGBTQ persons, victims of sexual assault, and people with disabilities—were genuinely fearful of life under a Donald Trump administration. Meanwhile, many Trump supporters felt that their time of exile had come to an end and that at last they lived in a country led by someone who knew and cared about them. Red state–blue state battles have been with us for decades, but this election felt different, with the two sides living in alternate universes, belonging to different tribes, speaking different languages.

This failure of intertribal communication was part of the election story. Trump's victory caught most media by surprise. How could Trump win (it was thought) after having alienated so many constituencies and been judged unqualified by the major opinion makers and the leaders of his own party? The Clinton campaign seems to have succumbed to the same faulty assumption—as, for example, when it decided that it could win Wisconsin without directly campaigning there.

The explanations for the election results are less relevant now than are strategies for moving forward with wisdom and courage. In this polarized nation, churches are one of the few places where Trump and Clinton voters not only inhabit the same space but have reason to communicate with one another. They sing in choir together, serve on committees together, feed the hungry together, take communion together. Congregations are also places where people have a divine mandate to take each other seriously enough to argue about the things that matter.

With the election itself over, congregations are in a position to launch conversations on issues—on how to make health care affordable, create a fair immigration system, understand Islam, or protect voting rights, for example. In doing so, they can do something to foster respect for each other's stories and skills in civil conversation—things the nation sorely needs.

We are under no illusion that such conversations invariably change minds, lead to compromise, or resolve political gridlock. These conversations will make some differences all the starker. They will surely press many Christians to explain why they stand in solidarity with those whose life and dignity is under threat.

The Gospel for the Sunday after Election Day was from Luke 21, about times of upheaval. Jesus calls his followers to see such times as opportunities—opportunities to testify to the kingdom of God.

**The failure of intertribal communication was part of the election story.**

# CENTURY marks

## SOMALI-AMERICAN LEGISLATOR:

Ilhan Omar, 34, made history by capturing a seat in the Minnesota House of Representatives, becoming the first Somali-American lawmaker in the country. When her family immigrated to the United States in 1995, during the Somali civil war, she spoke no English. The youngest of seven children, a Muslim, a former refugee, and the mother of three children, she beat a 22-year incumbent in the Democratic primary (NPR, November 10).

## INTIMIDATION ON THE RISE:

Hate crimes and racist intimidation are up following the recent election, according to offices that track such incidents. A group apparently based in Oklahoma sent a racist message to some black

freshmen at the University of Pennsylvania. In Columbus, Ohio, a man banged on the window of a Muslim woman driving a car, used a sexist slur against her, and told her she doesn't belong in this country. "The white supremacists out there are celebrating [Trump's] victory and many are feeling their oats," said Richard Cohen of the Southern Poverty Law Center (*USA Today*, November 14).

**CHURCH VANDALS:** Two Episcopal churches reported vandalism following the election of Donald Trump as president. "Trump nation whites only" was scrawled on a brick wall of a memorial garden at the Church of Our Savior in Silver Spring, Maryland. It was also written on the back of a banner adver-

tising Spanish-language services, and the banner was slashed. A swastika was spray painted on St. David's Church in Bean Blossom, Indiana, along with the phrases "fag church" and "heil Trump" (Episcopal Café, November 13).

**DEATH KNELL:** It was not a good year for those opposed to the death penalty. In Nebraska, voters agreed to bring back the death penalty, revoking a 2015 decision to abolish it and replace it with lifetime parole. Oklahoma voters favored a statement protecting capital punishment and adding a section to the state constitution that says "any method of execution shall be allowed, unless prohibited by the United States Constitution." California voters said no to a ballot question on repealing the death penalty and agreed to a separate measure that favors shortening the time between convictions and executions (NBC News, November 9).

**THE PAST IS NOT PAST:** Political differences are encoded in our evolutionary history, says Sebastian Junger (*Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, Twelve). Early hominids lived a precarious existence, and freeloaders were considered a threat to their very survival. Likewise, a mark of early human civilization was the emergence of a culture of compassion that cared for the ill, the wounded, the elderly, and the unlucky. The political divide between conservatives and liberals will never be overcome, argues Junger, as each side represents a component of our past.

**WHERE THE POLLUTION IS:** A 2012 study by Arthur O'Connor showed that residents of reliably red states suffer higher levels of industrial pollution than residents of blue states. Voters in 22 states that voted Republican in presidential elections between 1992 and 2008



"Please, Lord, make me T.S.A. precheck."



lived in the more polluted environments, yet they generally favor smaller government and less regulation. Residents in 22 Democratic states that favor more government regulation live with less pollution (Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, New Press).

## SOMETHING ABOUT A WALL:

Travel writer Paul Theroux went on a reporting junket along the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexican border, dropping down into Mexico when it was possible. People on both sides of the border think a wall to keep Latinos out of the United States is laughable. The remark "Show me a 30-foot wall, and I will show you a 35-foot ladder" expresses a widespread attitude. Wherever a wall now exists, there are tunnels. One tunnel runs from the bottom of an elevator shaft in a house in Tijuana to a fenced area on the American side. In a survey released in July, 72 percent of Americans and 86 percent of Mexicans in border towns oppose a wall to separate the two countries (*Smithsonian*, September 21).

**GETTING DARKER:** As a religious Jew, Michael P. Kramer, professor at Bar-Ilan University, admits that the title song of Leonard Cohen's last album left him breathless. "You Want It Darker" presents a world with unrelenting violence and unanswered cries for help. The song includes words from the mourner's kaddish, "Magnified, sanctified, be Thy holy name." Kramer recalled listening to Cohen's first album in 1968. His recent songs, "which exquisitely embrace the aches and pains, the losses and gains of growing older, of the body reluctantly relinquishing it[s] desires to the soul, are particularly sweet to my aging ears" (*Haaretz*, November 12).

**SUSPENDED:** Harvard University canceled the men's soccer program upon discovering that a system going back to 2012 for rating female athletes was widespread. In 2012 a lewd "scouting report" about female athletes' bodies and presumed sexual behaviors was put online by members of the men's soccer team. Harvard president Drew Faust said these "appalling" actions had

**"I believe God's hand intervened Tuesday night to stop the godless, atheistic progressive agenda from taking control."**

— Evangelist **Franklin Graham**, tweeting on the presidential election

**"I will urge the president-elect and the incoming administration to think long and hard before they are endangering the status of what for all practical purposes are American kids."**

— **President Obama**, talking about immigrant youths in the United States who were brought here illegally by their parents. In 2012 Obama issued an executive order that allows such children to stay (*Chicago Sun-Times*, November 14).

continued beyond 2012 and into the current season. Another Ivy League school, Columbia, ended the season of its wrestling team, citing players' use of racist, misogynistic, and homophobic terms (*Boston Globe*, November 3; *New York Times*, November 14).

**ENGINE THAT COULD:** Germany is about to unveil a passenger train run by hydrogen. It will be the first zero-emission train and will release only steam into the atmosphere. Lower Saxony has already ordered 14 of the trains, which could eventually replace 4,000 diesel engines in the country. The hydro-trains have the capacity to run 500 miles a day at speeds up to 87 miles per hour. December 2017 is the projected date for them to be put into service (*Independent*, November 1).

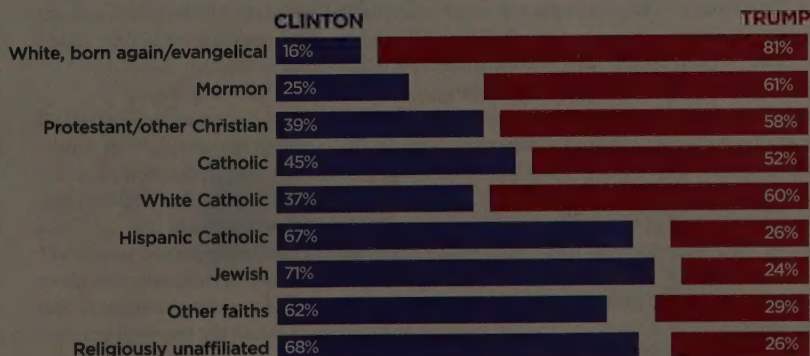
## SCREENING THE SCREENERS:

After a public outcry, Facebook has agreed no longer to allow advertisers to block certain "affinity groups," such as minorities like African-Americans, Hispanics, or Asian-Americans. The practice of blocking certain groups was discovered when the investigative journalism group ProPublica placed an ad on Facebook for housing and set it to exclude anyone with an "affinity" for African-American, Asian-American, or Hispanic people. A civil rights lawyer said that this appeared to be in violation of the federal Fair Housing Act. Facebook said it is developing an automated system to stop this exclusionary practice on its social media website but that it would take some months to implement (ProPublica, November 11).

## THE RELIGIOUS VOTE

SOURCE: PEW RESEARCH CENTER

What the exit polls tell us about how **religious groups** voted





The depths of an insufferable saint

# Learning to love Thérèse

by Suzanne Guthrie

IN MY EARLY adulthood I studied the 16th-century Carmelite mystics Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross at a Roman Catholic seminary. On my own I plowed through spiritual formation tomes written by Thomistic theologians mapping the interior journey of the soul.

Tome reading did not impress my teacher. He wanted me to love the 19th-century Carmelite mystic Thérèse of Lisieux. No, thank you. I'd read *The Story of a Soul*. The most loved saint besides Francis of Assisi? The greatest missionary of all time who never left her convent walls? Doctor of the church? The little way of spiritual childhood? I found her insufferable.

A decade later this teacher came to visit my husband and me when we lived in Europe. He made a pilgrimage to Lisieux and brought me presents: a picture book in French about the shrine, a collection of photographs of Thérèse, and a real treasure: a facsimile of the two notebooks and one letter which composed the original manuscript. This material rearranged, edited, and prettied up became *The Story of a Soul*, which those of us who read spiritual classics knew and loved—or hated.

This Roman Catholic priest still wanted this Episcopal priest to love Thérèse.

OK. I tried again, but now through the feminist eyes of Monica Furlong and Dorothy Day. Both women, embarrassed a bit for loving the “little flower,” nevertheless drew depth from Thérèse, saw through the kind of piety and language expected of her (some of which, it turns out, was not her own, including “little way of spiritual childhood,” which was an invention of her sister Pauline).

Furlong and Day took into account

the narrow intellectual and cultural life Thérèse was born into, the dysfunction of the enclosed contemplative Carmelite community she entered at age 15, the convent's hothouse atmosphere of manipulation and emotional blackmail, and Thérèse's impending early death from tuberculosis. To feminist writers, Thérèse's apotheosis in spite of her milieu makes her story remarkable.

A young bourgeois girl grows up with four older sisters (Marie, Pauline, Léonie, Céline) in an overly pious Norman family. Both parents had tried religious vocations unsuccessfully but brought their

Céline chooses one item, expecting Thérèse to choose one, and so on back and forth until the box is empty. Instead, Thérèse announces, “I choose everything,” and carries off the lot. “Everyone thought this quite fair.” (Is she implicating her family in her infantilization?) “This episode sums up the whole of my life,” she says.

Instead of cringing at this memory of the selfishness of a spoiled child, she observes that now, as a nun, she sees her flaws as an early signal of her own spiritual ambition. She still chooses all. “I do not want to be a saint by halves.” Clever twist.

## Thérèse observed within herself a humbling solidarity with atheists.

sense of dedication to God into family life. Thérèse is four when her mother dies, and five years later the sister to whom she transfers her maternal affection leaves the family to enter a local Carmelite convent. Thérèse herself wants to enter Carmel earlier than canonically allowed, and on a pilgrimage to Rome she throws herself at the feet of the pope himself. Eventually all the sisters but one join the same community. Léonie enters another order.

A clever raconteuse, Thérèse amuses her sisters with stories about her childhood. Pauline, having authority over the younger nun, asks her to write them down. These become the first of the three manuscripts.

In Manuscript A, Thérèse writes about the time Léonie, having outgrown her playthings, presents the two younger ones with a box of doll clothes and ribbons.

(But after her death her family will continue to participate in her infantilization.)

When I first read *The Story of a Soul* I was in my twenties and struggling to shed my own juvenilia, piousness, and prudishness. (Would you want anyone to read what you had written under the age of 25?) But Thérèse digs right in and uses her embarrassments and hypersensitivity as material for transcendence. It's all she has to work with.

The modern reader can't help but wonder what Thérèse might have done with a college education, some experience in the world away from her family, or some theological training. She says she's never going to be a soaring “eagle” like Teresa or John. Her ingenious solution to her “littleness” became the practice she writes about in Manuscript B, where again, she champions nothingness as a springboard to holiness. After all, most people are not geniuses like John



and Teresa, but ordinary and limited, like herself.

Manuscript B is a letter written to her sister Marie, a “souvenir” of a retreat Thérèse made in the fall of 1896. Marie wants to know how Thérèse manages to love God with such passion. Thérèse reflects on her thwarted ambitions—Apostle! Warrior! Martyr! Priest! Missionary! Reflecting on 1 Corinthians 13, Thérèse realizes that the vocation of love encompasses all those others. By loving heroically the difficult people within her convent, she can, in a way, choose everything.

Perhaps she knew John of the Cross’s comment written during a rough time near the end of his life: “Think nothing else but that God ordains all, and where there is no love, put love, and there you will draw out love.” Expanding on John, Thérèse wrote that her nothingness forces her to “borrow” God’s own love in order to love.

Thérèse tries to tell Marie that the passion attributed to her is not as keen as it looks. What she doesn’t tell Marie is that she is dying.

In June 1897, Pauline manipulates the mother superior into encouraging Thérèse to write again. Manuscript C, the thinner of the two notebooks, addresses Mother Marie de Gonzague, an aristocratic and attractive woman with an unreliable temperament, who, though at odds with Thérèse much of the time, was the one person in her community with the background to appreciate Thérèse’s gifts. Sounding cheerful and affectionate, trying to stay focused on her task—to write about her insights as the community’s novice mistress—Thérèse nevertheless confides about the “pitch black darkness” which encompasses her, and about God’s abandonment. Having longed for heaven all her life, her inner self says go ahead and dream of heaven and death, but it is “not what you hope for: but a still darker night, the night of annihilation!” If she says any more, she’ll blaspheme, she writes.

Previously, the absence of God would have disheartened her. “Now it has only

one result: it removes all natural satisfaction from my longing for heaven.”

In these confidences, played down and suppressed in the familiar classic, Thérèse at age 24 sounds like the soaring mystics she admired. A careful reading reveals the expected outcome of a dark night of the soul—a universalizing compassion.

Upon the onset of darkness, Thérèse observes within herself a humbling solidarity with atheists—a way of seeing the world she simply could not understand or imagine before.

She admits to eating the “bread of sorrow,” but again, the dark night accentuates not her own suffering but an identification with all the “wretched sinners” at the table. And yet this is where Jesus chooses to have table fellowship, she observes. “O God, be merciful to us sinners. . . . Send us away justified!” And here, as if church teaching interrupts her train of thought, “if the table defiled by them must be cleansed by one who loves You I will gladly stay there alone . . . until You are pleased to lead us to Your Kingdom of light” (italics mine).

This is the once selfish, spoiled “little

white flower” in full maturity, blooming in darkness.

Manuscript C breaks off mid-thought.

She lives another three months in perpetual agony, with gangrenous intestines and raw bedsores, coughing up what is left of her lungs. Mother Marie de Gonzague did not think morphine was appropriate for a nun.

On September 30, 1897, at 7:20 in the evening, the community was called to Thérèse’s bedside. Looking upon the crucifix the sisters held before her eyes she said, “OH! . . . I LOVE HIM! . . . MY GOD, I . . . LOVE . . . YOU!!!” and she died.

Sweet statues of Thérèse holding roses belie the shadow-eyed photos of Thérèse during her Job-like face-off with the absent God. Spiritual childhood does not make Thérèse great, but realizing adulthood, wholeness, losing the “I” to embrace the “we” of humanity, does. She finds limitlessness within the limited material of life at hand.

On the table in front of me I have the precious facsimile of Thérèse’s notebooks. Before he died I told my teacher that Thérèse speaks to my soul in the ways that he had hoped she would. But I myself had first to face the abyss. **CC**

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## Punctuation

Some parts of the Book of Kells are punctuated, not by ordinary marks like ampersands, colons, exclamations, commas, but like this: a horseman’s foot points like an arrow on a one-way street, drawing the eye to the text *Et tertia die resurget*. Instead of brackets, tiny animals. When a word didn’t fit on the line, they placed the extra syllable in the space over the line or tucked carefully under the unfinished word, guarded by the outstretched wing of a bird or the front paws of a dog. The scribes called this “putting the head under the wing” or “taking the turn down the path.”

I’d like to insert little animals into modern English: ladybugs instead of periods, question mark earthworms, starfish asterisks, squirrel-tail commas, and ellipses, a fine line of industrious ants, ever marching. . . .

Barbara Crooker

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*Suzanne Guthrie curates Soulwork Toward Sunday, an online weekly retreat on the lectionary Gospel reading. She lives in California.*

## Religious groups rally around issues after election

On the day after the election, Mervat Aqqad's seven-year-old son woke up and asked who got elected president.

When Aqqad broke the news to Ibrahim his first question was, "Do we have to move now?"

"I told him, 'You were born here. You're an American citizen like anyone else,'" said Aqqad, a middle school teacher in Raleigh, North Carolina.

They weren't the only ones concerned about increased acts of bigotry in the wake of the election of Donald Trump, who during his campaign proposed banning Muslims from entering the United States and who has appointed a man accused of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia as his chief strategist.

The American Jewish Committee and the Islamic Society of North America launched a new national group with an unprecedented size and influence: the Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council.

"We have to show the administration that as American Muslims and Jews—people of the faiths of Abraham—we are uniting to help the administration navigate in the proper constitutional manner, to uphold freedom of religion and constitutional rights for all American citizens," said Eftakhar Alam, senior coordinator at ISNA's Office of Interfaith and Community Alliances.

Months ago Jewish and Muslim leaders hatched the idea to come together around goals such as those set at the council's first meeting: to combat bigotry against Muslims and Jews in the United States, to highlight each group's contributions to American society, and to protect the rights of all religious minorities.

Members of the new council include clergy, businesspeople, and government officials. Among them are former U.S.

senator Joseph Lieberman, M. Farooq Kathwari, president and CEO of Ethan Allen Interiors, and Julie Schonfeld, vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly.

"The council's formation shows that American Muslim and Jewish leadership are now working together, focused on domestic developments," said Robert Silverman, AJC director of Muslim-Jewish relations. "This is a first and is good news for the entire country."

Most people who identify with faiths other than Christianity favored Hillary Clinton in the election. In contrast, exit polls showed that Christians who described themselves as evangelical and born-again gave Trump 81 percent of their votes, up 3 percentage points from their support for Mitt Romney, the 2012 GOP presidential nominee. Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton garnered 16 percent of their votes.

The voting statistics on mainline

Protestants make drawing meaningful conclusions difficult. Available exit poll data, compiled by a firm hired by a consortium of major national news organizations, does not break down the group by race—an important factor in analyzing the vote.

White Catholics favored Trump, casting 60 percent of their ballots for him, compared to 37 percent for Clinton. Cardinal Raymond Burke praised Trump's stance on reproductive rights, telling an Italian newspaper that the president-elect would "put in place every action possible to fight abortion." Burke dismissed concerns about Trump's stand on immigration.

Among Latino Catholics, 67 percent went for Clinton and 26 percent for Trump.

After the election some African-American faith leaders spoke of the need to combat voter suppression of African Americans, senior citizens, and others.



**PRAYER AND ACTION:** Men and boys take part in Friday prayers at the Islamic Association of Raleigh on November 11 in Raleigh, North Carolina. As many Muslims and others sought to calm their fears about increased attacks, a new Muslim-Jewish partnership formed to fight bigotry.



Barbara Williams-Skinner, cochair of the National African American Clergy Network, noted that the presidential election took place for the first time since the Supreme Court invalidated portions of the Voting Rights Act that provided voter protections.

"It makes a difference when your polling place moves to the suburbs," she said, and "when there's no Sunday transportation where pastors can take their people to the polls after a service."

—Yonat Shimron, Lauren Markoe, and Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service

## Hundreds of clergy gather in North Dakota to back people blocking pipeline

When John Floberg, an Episcopal priest on the Standing Rock reservation, called for clergy to join him in Cannon Ball, North Dakota, to show support for the Standing Rock Sioux Nation, he thought 100 might come.

Instead, more than 500 clergy from around the world came to support the Sioux Nation's efforts to protect land and resources they say are at risk from construction of the Dakota Access pipeline. They gathered November 2 and 3 at the Oceti Sakowin camp on the shores of the Cannonball River, one of several camps the Standing Rock Sioux and supporters have set up.

"The invitation of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe—the people who have been here for weeks and months—that's how it came to be that God called us together," Floberg said at the introductory gathering.

Emphasizing the interfaith and ecumenical nature of the gathering, Floberg encouraged everyone to represent their own faith tradition even as he acknowledged the "overwhelming" presence of Christian clergy. The next day the group processed to Backwater Bridge, where in late October 141 people were arrested while blocking construction.

Calling on tenets of prayer, peaceful presence, and nonviolent resistance, Floberg reminded attendees that they

were there at the invitation and under the guidance of tribal elders, who were striving to maintain a calm environment in which to protest.

"From the time the invitation went out," he said, "there's been a great deal of violence that's taken place. If that violence were to continue on that scale, there will be death. And we're not going to contribute to that."

The next morning began at the Oceti Sakowin's sacred fire, which is maintained around the clock. Surrounded by open space and several tarp-covered sun and rain shelters, the fire circle is the center of camp life where tribal elders gather to confer with one another, dancers greet the day, and people make community announcements.

Faith leaders officially disavowed the Doctrine of Discovery—a legal concept rooted in 15th-century papal writings that asserts Christians' right to land they claim to have discovered. Each leader read a portion of an adapted repudiation statement crafted by the World Council of Churches.

Tribal elders were presented with copies of the Doctrine of Discovery and, after discussing their options, the clergy elected to burn them to complete the act of apology.

"I remember looking down at my feet at one point, being very overwhelmed,

and recognizing that I was standing on holy ground," said Sara Lisherness, director of Compassion, Peace and Justice ministries at the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). "That kept being echoed through the day."

Clergy then marched to the barricaded and well-guarded Backwater Bridge. A burned-out shell of a car straddling the road and two torched trucks provided a blockade on the other side of the river. Law enforcement vehicles were lined up beyond the trucks. Representatives of faith groups continued to express remorse for the way religious groups had treated indigenous peoples and promised to listen to and join their voices to the concerns of Native groups.

Robert Two Bulls, a retired Lakota missionary for the department of Indian work in the Episcopal diocese of Minnesota, said, "I'll be the first one laying in front of that bulldozer, when they start digging and putting a fence in," he said. "I'm not afraid to give my life for that. For my land. For the land our ancestors gave us."

Since April, thousands of indigenous people and their allies have cycled through camps north of the Standing Rock reservation, where the 1,172-mile pipeline is set to run under the Missouri River. Initially focused on the environ-



**NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE:** Clergy and indigenous leaders process from the Oceti Sakowin camp to Backwater Bridge in a show of solidarity with Standing Rock Sioux seeking to protect their water source by contesting the construction of the Dakota Access pipeline near Cannon Ball, North Dakota.

PHOTO BY GREGG BRENNER FOR THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY

mental risk to water resources, activists—who call themselves water protectors—also aim to preserve of Native lands and sacred sites. They say the pipeline construction is a continued violation of the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty, whereby Native lands were guaranteed protection from exploration, extraction, and development.

Energy Transfer Partners, the Texas-based company constructing the pipeline, says it will “reduce the current use of rail and truck transportation to move Bakken crude oil [from oil fields in North Dakota] to major U.S. markets to support American energy needs.” The pipeline, if operational, is expected to move approximately 470,000 barrels of oil per day, with a capacity as high as 570,000 barrels per day.

Given long-standing resentment for the historic actions of the church, Floberg said, the gathering is the beginning of a long and complicated process of healing for indigenous peoples, especially those in central North Dakota.

“The Christian Church cannot have any daylight between it and the Standing Rock Sioux tribe in its stand,” he said. “Also, the Christian Church cannot have any daylight between it and people of color, [or] people who are here at Standing Rock, [or] with racism in any of its forms.”—Gregg Brekke, for the CHRISTIAN CENTURY

## Construction of mosque gives Greek Muslims hope of greater religious parity

It's time for evening prayers. Shah Malik heads to Masjid Usman, in an Athens neighborhood that is home to immigrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

A handwritten sign taped beside the entrance reads that the prayer space is registered as a library. At least 200,000 Muslims live in Athens, but of the 120 prayer spaces in the city, only three have been able to navigate a maze of legal restrictions to register as mosques.

“You have to hire a bunch of lawyers and inspectors,” said Malik, who came to Greece from Pakistan 14 years ago and serves as the makeshift mosque's treasurer. “You have to rent a proper space with safety measures, like multiple exits. It's a shame, but most of us cannot afford to do that.”

By operating as libraries or cultural centers, these mosques lack the legal protections that nonprofit places of worship enjoy. And they could be shut down by authorities.

Greek authorities recently announced that a contract had been awarded for the construction of a state-funded, properly registered mosque—the first since the nation's independence from the Ottoman Empire nearly 200 years ago. Arab diplomats in Athens have been trying to get permission to build a mosque since the 1970s.

The mosque, expected to cost about \$1 million, will have capacity for about 300 worshipers and is being built in a former naval repair yard in the Votanikos neighborhood of Athens, west of downtown.

“We have been hearing about this for decades,” Malik said. “If it happens, if it actually gets constructed, it would be great. It would allow us to feel like we can have an open presence here.”

When Greece gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1829, it sparked decades of tensions between ethnic Turks, who were almost all Muslims, and ethnic Greeks, who were almost entirely Greek Orthodox Christians.

Ottoman rulers had built mosques throughout Athens, even converting the Parthenon into one, but these structures were either destroyed or repurposed for uses such as warehouses or army barracks.

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne granted rights to some 100,000 Muslims in majority ethnically Turkish parts of Greece, such as allowing them to follow Islamic family law and to have nonprofit foundations and cemeteries, a quid pro quo that saw similar rights granted to the Greek Orthodox minority in Turkey.

Those ethnic Turks were the only Muslims in Greece until the 1980s, when

immigrants from Egypt, Libya, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh began to stream into the country, hoping to make a fresh start in Europe.

There have been recent waves of Muslim immigrants, too, from Syria and Afghanistan. At least 60,000 are waiting for political asylum decisions in the country. But the Muslim communities are ethnically fractured and lack the funds or organization to register a mosque.

South of downtown at the Arab-Hellenic Center for Culture, the community is better organized than the one at Masjid Usman, partly due to a multi-million-dollar donation from a U.K.-based Islamic foundation that helped the center convert a factory into the mosque in 2007. But today, funds have run out.

“We don't even have money to pay the electric bill,” said Tariq Jizawi, as he wrapped up Friday prayers, which were attended by about 100 men. “We need maybe 50,000 euros to get this place registered” as a mosque.

Right-wing extremists targeted the center, one of the most visible mosques in the city, in 2014, leaving a pig's head before the entrance, spraying graffiti, and painting a cross on the door.

For Muslims like Jizawi, who immigrated to Greece from Lebanon in the 1990s, it's time the Greek government followed the example of other European nations.

“They fund the church,” he said. “They should also give some funds to help mosques here.”

The Greek government has tried to find space for a mosque on five occasions in the last 15 years; each time it was rebuffed by lawsuits and public denunciations. Local bishops have been particularly outspoken. In contrast, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, leader of global Orthodox Christians, has repeatedly called for building a mosque in Athens.

Still, the issue of a mosque has become a rallying point for xenophobic groups in the country. Members of Golden Dawn, a now-banned political party, have led several violent protests



over the years against the Votanikos district mosque project.

The new state-funded mosque will not meet all of the needs of the large Muslim community in Athens. But, said Malik, it would be “an important step towards making us feel like we belong here.” —Umar Farooq, Religion News Service

## Greek hospitality is put to a religious test

For Abdul, a 17-year-old refugee from Afghanistan, and others who arrived in Greece without their parents, this year was their first Ramadan away from their families.

“In Afghanistan, our father, mother, sister all fast—all people are doing it. Here, it’s different,” Abdul said. “It will be difficult for us, but we will not forget our religion.”

Abdul, whose name was changed to protect his privacy as a juvenile, lives in a shelter in Athens with other underage refugees who have found themselves in one of the most homogeneous Christian nations in the world.

Over the past two years, Greece, which is 98 percent Orthodox Christian, has hosted 1 million migrants on their way to other European countries. The vast majority of those passing through were Muslim.

Greece has won high praise for its hospitality toward the migrants. Some islanders on the front lines were even nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. Greeks point to their history to explain this reception.

A population exchange with Turkey after World War I brought in over a million ethnic Greeks as refugees. When the new migration crisis began last year, there was empathy for the new arrivals, with many Greeks recalling what their grandparents went through.

Yet the nation has long resisted assimilating Muslim immigrants. Seventy-eight percent of Greeks say that being Christian is important to being truly Greek, more than in any other European country surveyed by the Pew Research Center.



PHOTO COURTESY OF REUTERS/ALAKS KONSTANTINIDIS / FILE PHOTO

**IDENTITY AND WELCOME:** Refugees and migrants wait to be registered at the Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos in November 2015. Most of the 1 million migrants who have reached Greece in recent years are Muslim. Those who have stayed present challenging questions to Greece, which is 98 percent Orthodox Christian.

“Historically, modern Greek national identity has been built against the other, and the other was Turkey,” said Anna Triandafyllidou, a professor at the European University Institute who specializes in Muslim integration.

Before its independence, Greece endured 400 years of Ottoman rule.

“Islam was the enemy,” she said.

Today, 57,000 refugees like Abdul remain stuck in Greece after Europe closed its internal borders, and many are likely to be forced to remain indefinitely. The European Union’s plan, adopted in July 2015, to relocate 160,000 asylum seekers has been moving glacially, to date relocating only a couple thousand refugees.

Angeliki Dimitriadi, a research fellow at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy and a specialist in irregular migration, said that, although the situation remains fluid, she expects that significant numbers of migrants will find themselves living in Greece for the long run.

Today, anti-Islam sentiment is on the rise, with 65 percent of Greeks expressing “unfavorable views” of Muslims, up from 53 percent in 2014, before the refugee crisis began, according to a sur-

vey released by the Pew Research Center on July 11.

More than half of Greeks believe refugees will increase the likelihood of terrorism in the country, and 72 percent consider them an economic burden.

Some find it surprising that the refugee crisis so far has not brought an uptick in violence against Muslims. Many new arrivals say they have not experienced discrimination based on their Muslim faith.

For Eid al-Fitr, the government opened stadiums throughout the city for prayer. On the first day of the holiday, members of the Pakistani community gathered in a former Olympic boxing stadium in northwest Athens. Although the refugees living in camps and shelters were welcome, none came.

Shahbaz Ahmed Siddiqi, an imam, was one of the last to leave the Olympic stadium after prayer ended. Siddiqi remembers the spike in xenophobia during the 2010 financial crisis, which saw the rise of the neo-fascist party Golden Dawn.

“Our Greek neighbors were afraid,” Siddiqi said. “They blamed all bad things on immigrants.” —Alexandra Markovich, Religion News Service

## Interfaith women's group marches for peace in Israel

Of the 4,000 women gathered at the Qasr el Yahud baptism site in the Jordan River Valley, many wore white T-shirts emblazoned with the words "Women Wage Peace" in Hebrew, English, and Arabic.

An Israeli in a sleeveless white tunic embraced an elderly Palestinian in a black hijab, as the gathering swayed to the beat of doumbek drums and tambourines and chanted: "Hey Ya, women walk for peace!"

A little later they marched down to the banks of the Jordan River and sat on the ground. Liberian Nobel Peace Prize laureate Leymah Gbowee, a Lutheran who previously worked for her church's Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program, stepped up to a microphone.

"If you see the march today and you don't see hope [and] you don't see peace—you are blind," she said. "What the women have done here today is put an end to the rhetoric that 'there is no partner for peace.' We, Israeli and Palestinian women, are partners for peace!"

The crowd cheered.

The event at Qasr el Yahud—attended by about 1,000 West Bank Palestinians and 3,000 Israelis, both Jews and Arabs—was one stop on a two-week March of Peace in October that started near Israel's border with Lebanon and ended in Jerusalem. It was organized by an Israeli movement called Women Wage Peace, which unites Jewish and Arab activists in a call to restart negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. The group's rallying cry is "We won't stop until there's an agreement."

The culmination of the march—a rally October 19 in front of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's official residence—drew 20,000 participants.

The organization was born out of Israel's 2014 war with Hamas, which included daily missile attacks and killed 72 Israelis and more than 2,000 Gazans.

Amal Abou Ramadan, a Muslim teacher and single mother from Jaffa, was one of those shaken by the bloodshed. She recounts how Jewish and Arab neighbors stopped speaking to each

other but also how during a siren warning of incoming rockets she found herself comforting a Jewish woman, a complete stranger, on the street.

"She was crying and shouting, she needed someone to hold her, so I did," she said. "I didn't know her, but it didn't matter. We are all brothers and sisters."

After the war she felt deeply depressed, and when a friend invited her to a meeting of a new peace movement, her first impulse was to pass: "I said, another movement? What difference is it going to make?"

Today, she is a regional coordinator.

For the past two years, the women have combed the country with marches, protests, and parlor meetings. Last year, on the anniversary of the Gaza war, they held a 50-day fast for peace in front of Netanyahu's residence, and this year, during the autumnal Jewish holiday of Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles), they set up a "Sukkah for peace." They also organize screenings of *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, the documentary film about Gbowee's women's peace movement in Liberia.

There are no Palestinian members from the West Bank or Gaza—the decision from the start was to keep the organization Israeli, the better to influence local public opinion—but they work closely with Huda Abu Arqoub, a Palestinian from Hebron and director of the Alliance for Middle East Peace.

Abu Arqoub helped them conceive of the march and mobilized West Bank Palestinians to come to Qasr el Yahud.

"I still get the chills when I think of the buses arriving and women streaming out," she said. "I wish we could take them all to Jerusalem," she added, referring to Israel's policy of limiting West Bank residents' access to the city.

She herself couldn't continue marching with the Israelis and had to return to Bethlehem and go through a checkpoint in order to speak at the rally. "In a conflict zone, we cannot afford hopelessness," she said. "It will be the end of us."

Instead of calling for one of the specific proposed solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—two states, one state, a binational federation—the movement simply calls for an agreement.

"There are enough initiatives: the

Geneva initiative, the Saudi initiative, the American initiative, the world doesn't need another one," said Hamutal Gouri, a founding member. "We are saying to leaders, take the layouts you've got and reach an agreement. Whatever is agreed on both sides, we will accept."

The general message enables the support of women who wouldn't normally find themselves in a more standard peace organization, such as Michal Forman, a Jewish settler who was hurt last year in a stabbing attack and spoke at the rally. But it also leaves them open to criticism.

"Their demands are not forceful enough," said Hanna Herzog, professor emerita of sociology at Tel Aviv University and codirector of the Center for Advancement of Women in the Public Sphere at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute. "They're walking a tightrope trying to be so inclusive, and it makes it very easy to silence and neutralize them. On the other hand, at least they're demanding peace, which is so rare in Israel nowadays."

In a survey of Israelis taken in June by the Democracy Institute, 52 percent of Jews and 69 percent of Arabs said they would support an agreement requiring Israel to pull out of most of the West Bank. However, 55 percent of Jews also supported continued control over Palestinians in some form.

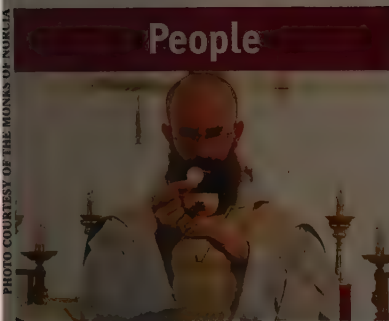
A study of 40 peace processes in 35 countries over the past three decades showed that when women's organizations were effectively involved—whether as a political party, as in the case of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, or by actively campaigning for the end of hostilities, as in Liberia—an agreement was almost always reached and had a higher chance of implementation.

The reason, according to Marie O'Reilly, director of research at Inclusive Security, a think tank based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is that women tend to reach across ethnic and religious divides and think of the day after the big signing. While that day still may be far off, the activists are not deterred.

"From the beginning, we set our deadline at four years," Gouri said. "We have a clear goal, we have determination—and we have plenty of hope." —Naomi Darrow, *The Christian Science Monitor*



## People



■ When a 6.6-magnitude earthquake struck Norcia, Italy, **Benedict Nivakoff** and the other Benedictine monks who live there escaped injury.

But their historic basilica and monastery, built above the birthplace of St. Benedict, collapsed on October 30.

"Is this the end of the book or the beginning of a new chapter?" asked Nivakoff, an American monk from Connecticut who has lived in Norcia for 15 years and is the subprior of the community. "We want to make this a new chapter."

The 16 monks launched a fund-raising campaign called Deep Roots to rebuild the 14th-century basilica and monastery and to breathe new life into Norcia. They have already drawn the support of billionaire cashmere manufacturer Brunello Cucinelli, who lives in Solomeo, another medieval hilltop town 90 miles away.

"I will help them with sustenance and the monastery's reconstruction," Cucinelli told the Italian daily *La Repubblica*. "Their presence has brought back spirituality to [Norcia]."

Norcia—also known by its Latin name, Nursia—was the home of St. Benedict, founder of Western monasticism. Norcia's Benedictine monastery was active from the tenth century until it was suppressed under Napoleon 200 years ago. The monks returned in 1998 and built a business exporting beer to the United States.

Brewery production has been suspended, and the monks have moved to another monastery, which they are restoring outside Norcia, as they work out what comes next.

For now Norcia is a virtual ghost town. Many people had already been evacuated from the area after a string of recent earthquakes, including a 6.2-magnitude quake in August that killed nearly 300. Another 22,000 people are homeless.

"Almost everyone was gone when it happened," said Nivakoff, referring to the October 30 earthquake. "Four of the priests went around the town trying to give people the last rites. We had to force people out of their homes. Every church in Norcia is on the ground."

The loss of the basilica was devastating for the monks.

"It is a bit like when a loved one dies, you don't realize the loss at first," Nivakoff said. "The basilica lasted more than 1,000 years. It feels like the end of an age." —Josephine McKenna, Religion News Service

■ Before **Nat Dixon** preaches, he picks up his tenor saxophone and riffs a bit.

Blending the gospel message with jazz is what the former full-time musician has been doing for years, with his parishioners at St. Stephen's United Methodist in the Bronx, New York, as the principal beneficiaries.

Recently Dixon released his first CD in more than 20 years, *Made in New York City: Nat Dixon and Friends*. It includes Dixon's sacred compositions, such as "My Lord, My God" and "Jesus Eyes," as well as his "Back Street Blues," a 1990s hit on jazz radio stations, to which he added Christian lyrics.

Dixon calls his music GOJA—gospel and jazz.

"The idea is good news jazz that focuses on lifting up Jesus Christ," he said.

Dixon's collaborators for the recording include Lori Hartman, pastor of St. Paul United Methodist Church in Jamaica, New York. She sings on "My Lord, My God," a composition she describes as a musical prayer. She, like Dixon, entered ministry after a career in jazz.

"He speaks the gospel through the music," she said of Dixon.

Dixon took up the clarinet as a boy, and recalls his first gig: performing with a youth orchestra at Carnegie Hall. He moved on to the saxophone and toured the world.

One constant in his life was Harlem's Salem United Methodist Church, where he served as a lay speaker. A pastor there

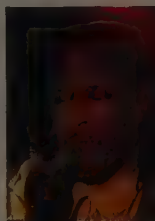


PHOTO BY NATE DIXON III

encouraged him to consider seminary, and Dixon—at first incredulous at the idea—ultimately attended Drew University School of Theology.

Since 2005, Dixon has been pastor at St. Stephen's. He taught music for years through a Saturday academy at the church, and he leads a Word and Jazz service on Wednesdays.

Dixon plans to retire as pastor in June but expects to keep composing and performing.

"Music is integral to my ministry," Dixon said. "And I'm grateful for that." —Sam Hodges, United Methodist News Service

■ **Leonard Cohen**, a Jewish singer, songwriter, poet, and novelist most widely known for his song "Hallelujah," died November 7 at age 82.

Cohen, grandson of a Talmudic scholar, grew up in Montreal's Jewish community.

"The first poetry that affected me was in the synagogue, in the liturgy and the Bible stories, and that would send shivers down my spine," Cohen said in the documentary *Leonard Cohen: I'm Your Man*.

He became a Buddhist monk in the 1990s, which he didn't see as conflicting with Judaism, according to interviews.

In the title track of his album *You Want It Darker*, released in October, he sings "Hineni, Hineni, I'm ready, my Lord."

Cohen also published a dozen books, many of them poetry. Mordecai Finley, an LA rabbi whose synagogue Cohen attended in his final years, told the *New Yorker* that he often reads from Cohen's collection of contemporary psalms, *Book of Mercy*, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Cohen was "a great liturgical writer," Finley said.

Psalm-like qualities are also evident in songs such as "If It Be Your Will" and "Come Healing."

"This biblical landscape is very familiar to me," Cohen said in a recent video posted on his Facebook page. "Once they were universal references. . . . That's no longer the case today, but it is still my landscape." —the CHRISTIAN CENTURY staff

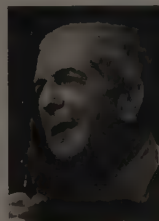


PHOTO BY KATIA VIA CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE

# LIVING The Word

December 24, Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1–20

**AT CHRISTMASTIME**, are we too busy to think about Jesus? We simply cannot spare the time to trot out Luke's well-worn birth narrative, recounting for us once again how God breaks into human history to offer a unique son and to promise that this son is the one who can make us whole and complete—the one who can restore our long-lost joy in the simple yet profound things that infuse our lives with meaning. Who has time to think about the Jesus of scripture at Christmastime?

We know all too well this history and his story. This time of year, even passersby who don't know the language and theological claims of our faith can recognize the familiar scenes and signs of our story, from decorated church lawns to over-the-top home displays. We've pretty much seen and heard it all. We've sat through enough reenactments of the crèche in church basements and fellowship halls to skip this year's performance with the flimsiest of excuses—even when our children are in it. We're just too busy getting ready for Christmas to think about Jesus.

What is lost when religious hope is no longer at the center of our holiday celebration? According to Harvey Cox, Christmas becomes a family reunion, Easter a spring style show, and Thanksgiving a time when there is no one to thank. In the midst of our drummed-up joy and quickly fading delight over unwrapped gifts, we sense that something is missing.

Lincoln biographer Ronald White describes this feeling as “the presence of an absence.” We may no longer speak the language of faith into our celebration, yet we know that the celebration is lacking something crucial. All of our busyness cannot wipe out our sense of this abiding presence of an absence; it refuses to go quietly into the night. That absence is none other than the ever-present movement of God on our behalf.

God's busyness for us (*pro nobis*) often gets lost in our busyness for one another. We believe ourselves to be justifiably busy—we have gifts to buy, food to prepare, houses to decorate, guest lists of family and friends to complete. But our year-in and year-out, uninspiring busyness is no match for the purposeful, awe-inspiring busyness of God. In Luke's narrative we see God on the move, acting with purpose and speed to bring us into the fullness of the people God would have us to be.

In the juxtaposition of the John and Jesus birth stories, we see God's movement between earth and the cosmic realm. The neighbors and relatives who rejoice over John's birth are overshadowed by the more universal and expansive cosmic responses to Jesus' birth. God's movement is also shown in the religio-political repercussions of Jesus' birth. The registration of “all the world” asserts Caesar Augustus's sovereignty over that world—but the birth of God's son is made known not to the emperor or even the governor, but instead to peasant shepherds. Jesus' birth shows that God is on the move to dethrone the powerful and lift up the lowly. The census, even in Luke's day, presupposed registration in the place of a person's residence, not their hometown. But God is on the move, and Luke has Mary and Joseph travel from historical Nazareth to messianic Bethlehem.

Ironically, the one who will ascend the throne of David enters the world homeless. Forced to place her baby in a feeding trough, Mary improvises a solution for the cool night by wrapping him in cloths. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus

## God's busyness often gets lost in our busyness for one another.

continues to lack a permanent home. Luke's Jesus, like Luke's God, is constantly on the move.

Even before his birth, as an unborn child Jesus travels from Mary's home in Nazareth to her cousin Elizabeth's home and then back to Nazareth. The shepherds live in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks. The angels appear to them suddenly—movement by the heavenly host! Then with haste, we are told, the shepherds move to go find Mary and Joseph and the child. Through their actions, all involved demonstrate the appropriate response to the movement of the omnipotent God, who is determined to bring a savior into the world.

This season ought to remind us that we are not the only ones who are busy. God is always busy, in the best way, for us. When we push God's movement out of our celebration, we sense that something unacknowledged in the story is nonetheless present in a very real way. The disparate parts of our lives will not make sense until this presence of an absence is brought once again into our rushed and harried lives this time of year. Our movement, however well intentioned, will make little sense until we learn once again to reenact God's movement with praise and rejoicing.



# Reflections on the lectionary

December 25, Christmas Day

John 13–14

**THE FOURTH GOSPEL** begins with a prologue that is quite complex—and quite unlike anything known to the other three. Interpreting it for Christmas Day worshipers requires nothing short of a reset button, if one hopes to be heard with profit. These worshipers are restless; often their attention spans allow them to grapple for just a little while with the new, the now, and the next, to say nothing of the complex. The mere mention on Christmas Day of a “word becoming flesh” is likely to cause people to wander off into the wild, blue yonder. To wade in too deeply with exegetical expertise may well reduce a preacher’s words to irrelevance—especially in the holiday season, when even the most ardent Christians still have many unchecked items on their to-do list.

Yet this passage is such an important one for contemporary listeners. And it is a preacher’s responsibility to reach some kind of a “so what” moment from John’s prologue, from grappling with this in-breaking activity on the part of God.

The prologue forms a hymn dedicated to a heavenly being who became human on our behalf. Its opening words bear witness to the life of God in Jesus and the oneness of the Word with God. This is our story—this Word who is Jesus has been sent by God into our world—and Christmas is a time for us to reaffirm its promise and hope in our lives. This story at the heart of our faith must be constantly reaffirmed.

For after all, it is not a story without opposition—in John’s day or ours. There are countless other voices making truth claims about how best to live a life filled with meaning and purpose, in obedience to a higher power. John recognizes this opposition to the Word that is Jesus Christ, and he calls on us to stake a claim and bear witness to the truth that it is indeed God who has sent Jesus into our world. In fact, the Fourth Gospel is filled with parallels and juxtapositions calling on us to take sides, to witness, to stand and be counted as believing that God has acted in a unique way on our behalf. In the prologue light and darkness are front and center, but throughout John many other oppositions exist as well: good and evil, truth and falsehood, death and life, them and us, insiders and outsiders.

This Jesus, identified by John as the *logos*, is the light that shines in darkness. As hopeful as such a declaration sounds, there is a tone of opposition here between the light and the darkness. Though the darkness does not overcome the light, it is also the case that the world does not know him and his own do not accept him. What is needed, then and now, is a witness:

someone to bear witness to the truth of who God is and what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

After all, every discovery of reality awaits the willingness of a witness to share what that witness has seen and heard. So it is here in the prologue that we are introduced to the glory of the eternal Word—standing in juxtaposition to the simple witness of a mortal prophet. Herein lies John the Baptist’s importance to the coming of Jesus into the world. Though any number of scholars believe the mention of John in the prologue stems from a later hand, he nonetheless bears witness to the redemptive drama unfolding before us.

All about this hymn there is the scent of witness. Its witness to the presence of Christ is focused primarily beyond the created world of time and space. But with the coming of John, the understanding of witness moves explicitly into the realm of human history. John’s specific purpose for being in the world is to bear witness to Jesus. In the synoptic tradition John the Baptist introduces Jesus; in the Fourth Gospel his sole function is to act as a witness.

John’s witness serves the same purpose as the Fourth Gospel itself: that all might believe through him. To believe through John is to receive his witness as true. And throughout the Gospel, to believe truly in Jesus is not simply to give assent to information about him. It entails a person’s total allegiance to and wholehearted trust in Jesus. I wonder if it is too much for us to say to one another and to all we meet during the holiday season: *Yes, I know him. He is the one sent from God, and he can indeed transform your life.*

Maybe the most pertinent question before us is not unfolding the complexities of logos theology, but rather understanding what it means to bear witness to the coming of Jesus into our world. What’s needed on a day like Christmas—or, maybe more importantly, what can be heard and received on such a day—is some understanding of the testimony of a witness. What is needed is a timely nod of assent that with the appearance of John the Baptist, God’s story has moved from the cosmic and the eternal to a specific time and place within the arena of human history. A prophet named John has been sent from God as a human delegate on a purely human mission, that of bearing testimony to someone greater than himself.

In a way, John’s witness makes our witness possible. It emboldens us: we too can bear witness to the truth of the Christ child among us.

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*The author is Cleophus J. LaRue, who teaches homiletics at Princeton Theological Seminary and is author of I Believe I’ll Testify (Westminster John Knox).*

# LIVING BY The Word

January 1, First Sunday after Christmas Day  
Matthew 2:13-23

**THE LITTLE SNEAK** got away is my first thought after reading this story of the flight into Egypt. Jesus got away. All those other boy babies didn't.

Mary and Joseph hear Jesus' hunger cries, his babbling, and then his first words. They cheer when Jesus pulls himself up for the first time. They clap and hold their palms open to urge him to toddle toward them on unsteady feet. They delight in his delight at the shadows of the fig leaves on the floor of their house in the late afternoon. They sing him lullabies and play patty-cake. They gaze at him with wonder, not because he is the Messiah but because he is their son. Jesus is spared. All those other families are wrecked.

"God abandoned him," Liz said. Liz and I were standing beside the hospital bed of her 55-year-old husband Frederic. Frederic had woken early that morning, left his wife sleeping in bed beside the warm imprint from his body, gone to the furnace room of their basement, and put a rope over an exposed beam. When Liz woke up she went to the kitchen and heard Frederic in the basement. She called to him. Frederic came part way up the stairs, shielding from her view the white length of rope. He told her he was just going through some old boxes.

Later, when he didn't come upstairs, Liz went down and found him. She put her arms around him, trying to lift him to relieve the pressure from his neck. He was too heavy. She couldn't lift him up or get him down. In order to call for help, Liz had to let him go. She had to let him go and then run up the stairs and rummage through her purse, pushing aside keys and wallet and Kleenex to find her phone.

When the paramedics arrived, they resuscitated Frederic. Now he was on life support in the intensive care unit. Family and intimate friends claimed the waiting room as their own. Waves of other friends came through to offer hugs, support, and snacks. Different groups huddled around Frederic's bed telling stories about him, stories that ended in ripples of laughter, which in turn ended with a catch in the throat as we realized where we were.

In a gap between visitors, Liz and I were alone in Frederic's room. She stood by the head of the bed. She stroked his cheek, swept his hair off his forehead, caressed his arm, grabbed hold of his hand. "God abandoned him," she said.

"Yes," I said. "God did." I wasn't trying to mirror Liz's feelings back to her or affirm her experience. I didn't have a pas-

toral strategy in mind or a scripture text at the ready. I said yes because I believed it to be true.

There are some who have told me that God wasn't absent that day—that God only seemed to be gone, a kind of stage magician's trick, or like a parent out of sight of a crying baby. They tell me the story of the boy on the vision quest who is blindfolded and afraid and then finds out in the morning that his father was always there. Maybe. But this sort of absence feels like the absence of a stolen child or a dead parent or a runaway lover. We keep expecting the loved one to show up again and erase the pain of our current circumstance. We keep being disappointed.

Jesus escapes; the innocents are slaughtered. We can't talk about the one without acknowledging the other. Four days after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, Diana Butler Bass wrote a piece for *Day 1* asking the question, Where was God in Newtown? Bass suggests that God was neither absent nor present—God was hidden. She writes,

As answers go, the hidden God will not completely satisfy and can never get to questions of motive. Isn't that the point? Somewhere, deep in our souls, we know we cannot know. The hidden God, I think, is the only God that makes any sense of Newtown: One neither and both present and absent; One in the hands of rescuers but not the hands that wielded the guns; One in the midst of murdered but not the act of murder. This is the God who is in all places and nowhere.

I can come to terms with a God who respects our free will, even if that means not saving the babies. I don't really expect Jesus to be some kind of baby superhero who shoots Herod with flaming darts out of his eyes and vanquishes Herod's army to a triumphant musical score. What troubles me is that in Jesus, God runs away. God abandons all those other babies. God acts to save one baby, and in some way beyond what I can really grasp, that baby is God. God saves his own skin and escapes unscathed.

It's not God's vulnerability that is difficult, but rather God's self-protection. And not just from the swords of Herod's army. Where is God when all those parents are weeping? Is God hidden or hiding?

Liz and I stood beside Frederic's bed for several minutes. She stroked Frederic's face and arm and leg. She leaned down and kissed him on the cheek and whispered in his ear. I stood vigil.

Liz turned to me and said, "Where's Frederic?" I said, "With God."



# Reflections on the lectionary

January 6, Epiphany of the Lord

Matthew 2:1-12

**WOULD THE MAGI** have been as interested in finding this newborn king if they had only to go around the corner?

Twenty years ago, on a solo journey to Cusco, Peru, I learned that traveling can be a pilgrimage and not just a trip. Though I had moments of loneliness and uncertainty, I felt myself held in the hands of a beneficent universe. Curiosity pushed me past my inhibitions to talk with strangers. I chatted with bus drivers and schoolchildren. I let go of my assumptions and my adult need to know without asking, and I let my inner three-year-old ask *what* and *why* and *how*. Without a fixed agenda I could go the nearby village of Pisac, sit in the town center, and watch as the market vendors set up and called greetings to one another. Getting lost was just a chance to meet someone new. I learned to follow directions one turn at a time. I couldn't rush.

I wonder if that is what it was like for the Magi when they visited Bethlehem. Did they wander the town in wide-eyed wonder? Did they try the food with both caution and eagerness? Did they delight in new combinations of bright colors or the beauty of muted shades? Did they stand entranced by the notes of an unfamiliar musical instrument? Did the pungent aroma of foreign spices fill their nostrils? Did their curiosity about strange customs push them past their good manners to ask probing and maybe personal questions? Did they find themselves at the mercy of strangers? Did freedom from their familiar surroundings open them to the mystery of the divine?

Jennifer is an active member of my church in suburban Chicago. She's there most Sundays, which I can't say for most of the congregation. She's taken on major projects and helped with artistic events; she sings in the choir. But every time I invite her to a Bible study, a spiritual book discussion, or a class on a "Christian" topic, she turns me down. Yet last year she dove into Dahn Yoga. This summer she spent an evening with people who channel spirit guides from former centuries. Recently she invited me to a shamanic healing circle that promised to unlock my calling and highest potential, enabling me to trust my inner guidance and listen to my soul's desire to live a more balanced, peaceful, and passionate life.

It's not that Jennifer is uninterested in growing spiritually. She's just uninterested in growing spiritually in the church.

I officiated a wedding as a favor to someone. The couple was reluctant to use any scripture. Instead they asked me to read a portion of Aristophanes's speech from the *Symposium*, a speech about human beings being originally created with

four arms, four legs, and a head with two faces and then split apart by Zeus and condemned to spend their lives in search of their other halves. They said they just didn't "believe the Bible." I don't think they believed the Plato quote either, at least not in the way they assumed I believe scripture. Their distance from Plato's words freed them to engage it like they would poetry. What they thought they knew about Christianity told them that scripture's meaning is fixed and absolute.

Has familiarity with the Christian faith bred boredom or even contempt? I don't think Jennifer is alone in thinking she already knows what she'll learn in a study at church, in being not particularly curious about it.

When I was a new pastor, I could feel the air in the room change whenever I "came out" as clergy. Whoever I was talking to would explain the problems they had with Catholic or Pentecostal or Lutheran teachings. They would apologize for not going to church, and for swearing. Now, almost 20 years later, the response to my vocation has changed: it's a bit like I've announced that I'm a classics professor. There might be mild curiosity, but I observe less and less discomfort. Generally people don't see what I do as being relevant to them.

I think this could be good news for the church. If people are able to approach the Christian faith without thinking they already know what it is, they might discover something new. They might hear the good news for themselves.

I spent part of my summer renewal leave at the Iowa City Summer Writing Festival. One of my teachers, the poet Diana Goetsch, said that if we weren't surprised in our writing, then we weren't really writing. If we didn't discover something we hadn't known before—stumble on a new insight or thought—then what we were doing wasn't writing, at least not writing that mattered. I realized that in my sermon preparation I had been leaving out any possibility for discovery. I had known what I was going to say before I started the sermon. No wonder I was bored. Unlike the Magi following the star to Bethlehem, I wasn't going anywhere new. My sermons were trips down the well-worn paths of memory lane, not pilgrimages into unknown woods.

We began every class by revisiting Robert Bly's explanation of the poet William Stafford's theme of the "golden thread," which Diana called the Rosetta Stone of the inner practice of writing. Bly quotes Stafford saying that "the stance to take, reading or writing, is neutral, ready, susceptible to now." This is the stance of the traveler, the stance of the spiritual seeker. Preachers make much of the Magi going home a different way. I wonder if we also need to seek Bethlehem by uncharted routes?

*The author is Melissa Earley, pastor of Northbrook United Methodist Church in Illinois.*

# CHRISTMAS PICKS

*Selected by the CENTURY staff*

## Jill Peláez Baumgaertner | poetry editor

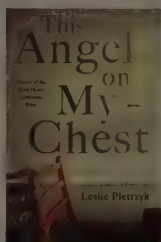
"We tell ourselves stories in order to live." Joan Didion's words form the epigraph to *This Angel on My Chest* (University of Pittsburgh Press), a most unusual collection of fiction by Leslie Pietrzyk. A widow at the age of 37, Pietrzyk has written 16 stories about young widows who, like her, cope with loss and grief. They've had to figure out how to keep living, the ghosts of husbands with them every day, even after happy remarriages. One woman remembers ten things only she knows about her husband; another creates a multiple-choice quiz in which there are no correct answers, only the conclusion: "You will tell the same story again and again until you know it is true." These stories are about rehearsing a death and learning to live beyond it. Each one is surprising in its own way, well-crafted, and completely heart-wrenching.

*Uses and Abuses of Moses: Literary Representations Since the Enlightenment* (University of Notre Dame Press), by Theodore Ziolkowski, is an encyclopedic overview of a staggering number of novels, poems, plays, and films about Moses from multiple perspectives: Zionist, anti-Zionist, feminist, Methodist, Mormon, magical realist, satirical, and even cynical. The book is descriptive rather than interpretive but in all ways astonishing.



Joy Williams's *Ninety-nine Stories of God* (Tin House Books), a small, edgy collection of stories as short as one sentence and as long as a few paragraphs, presents cockeyed pictures of a god unrecognizable in any venue other than a postmodern dream. Yet somehow they draw you in, fascinating in their droll humor, cynicism, or wisdom.

*New Selected Poems* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), by Les Murray, an Australian considered by some to be the finest living poet writing in English, constantly takes the



reader by surprise with its versatility, its odd and wonderful angle of vision, and its artistry.

## Celeste Kennel-Shank | news editor

The best concert I saw in 2016 was Neko Case, k.d. lang, and Laura Veirs performing their first album as a trio, *case/lang/veirs* (Anti/Epitaph), which was released this summer. The strengths of each of the singer-songwriters are drawn out with alternating lead and backup singing. "Honey and Smoke" has flourishes of a sixties girl group that are delightful. Listeners who enjoy strong vocals are likely to be captivated.



*Four Lions* (Drafthouse Films), a British comedy about anti-Western terrorism and the assimilation of immigrants, is possibly the most intelligently hilarious, hilariously intelligent film I've ever seen. At moments the action and dialogue came together so brilliantly that I couldn't even make a sound to laugh as I took it all in. (There is some violence, but it's not gratuitous.) Though the movie first came out a few years ago, its political satire is even more timely after this year of Brexit and ever-increasing Islamophobia. Give this film to your loved one most sorely in need of catharsis after election season.



For the person in your life who often feels too busy even for stress-reducing activities, give the (free!) gift of YouTube videos "Yoga with Adriene" ([youtube.com/user/yogawithadriene](https://www.youtube.com/user/yogawithadriene)). These videos, usually running 20 to 30 minutes each, begin with the basics of yoga postures and breathing, and include yoga for lower back pain, for a good night's sleep, and to calm nerves. Wheelchair users and others for whom getting



down on a mat may not be an option can try the gentle chair yoga routine.

## Elizabeth Palmer | books editor

**The Long, Long Life of Trees** (Yale University Press) by Fiona Stafford, who teaches literature at Oxford, is a beautifully written history of interpretation of trees through art, literature, religion, and politics. The sycamore was at the heart of England's first trade union movement, the elm "hints at unspoken vulnerabilities and darkening horizons," and the holly symbolizes "free spirit." While Stafford focuses on how trees carry cultural tropes, German forester Peter Wohlleben portrays trees as community members in **The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate** (Greystone). Combining careful science with anthropomorphic vision, Wohlleben reveals how trees relate to one another and other members of the ecosystem, sharing information and support through roots, pollen, fungi, and even audible signals.



Liz Moore's newest novel, **The Unseen World** (Norton), is a tender coming-of-age story that raises ethical questions about technology and human consciousness, compassion in the face of suffering, and what it means to be human. Robert Seethaler's novel **A Whole Life** (translated from the German by Charlotte Collins; Farrar, Straus and Giroux) is as quiet and simple as it is profound. It tells the story of one man's life in a precarious mountain village, punctuated by occasional drama but mostly just gorgeously mundane. Picador Modern Classics' new edition of William Johnston's translation of Shūsaku Endō's magisterial novel **Silence** presents elegant cover art and a foreword by Martin Scorsese, who has just adapted the book for film.



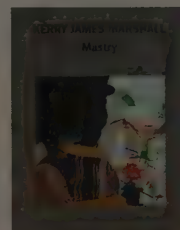
**Nanette's Baguette** (Disney-Hyperion), Mo Willems's newest picture book for young children, isn't religious. But it portrays a journey in which Christians may find symbols of baptism ("get wet"), Eucharist ("baguette"), sin ("Nanette forgets"), repentance ("beset with regret"), and forgiveness ("reset"). Older children will enjoy the new Eerdmans Books for Young Readers edition of George MacDonald's allegorical fable **The Golden Key**, with stunning black-and-white scratchboard illustrations by Ruth Sanderson.

## Daniel Richardson | art director

Poet Mary Oliver continues to live a life of patient, attentive contemplation. But it's a bit of shock to find her firing off such

glancing bursts of wisdom in **Upstream** (Penguin), her first book of essays in over a decade. Her detailed and personal take on the behaviors of local birds, 19th-century writers (like Emerson, Whitman, and Poe), and the inner life of a lone female spider left me ready for a more comprehensive look at her life of considered solidarity with the natural world.

After **Mastry** debuted at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, this landmark survey of paintings by Kerry James Marshall moved to the Met Breuer museum in Manhattan, where it will remain through early 2017. In the show and its attendant catalog, one of the most important living American painters draws on his command of classical artistic conventions to convincingly reframe all of art history, bringing issues of contemporary African-American identity, community, and cultural history front and center for perhaps the first time.



Ohio musician Lydia Loveless continues to explore the boundaries between country and rock on her latest album, **Real** (Bloodshot Records), this time employing the more polished sounds of 1980s pop. Her lyrics navigate the fits and starts of relationships and the chaotic process of self-discovery. But her true gift is her ability to deliver deftly crafted pop hooks with a dynamic vocal twang (at times sounding like a countrified Stevie Nicks) that is at once distinctive and completely accessible.



It's been over six years since the Radio Dept.'s last LP. With the recently released **Running Out of Love** (Labrador), the band continues to conjure seductive dream pop from electronic and indie pop sounds of the 1980s and '90s (think Pet Shop Boys, New Order, Stone Roses) with lyrics that are often searing critiques of Swedish and international politics. This thoughtful, melodic music can be appreciated quickly or over the long run.

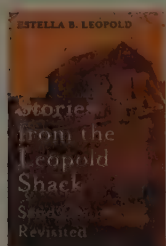
## Debra Bendis | senior editor

Donna M. Johnson's **Holy Ghost Girl** (Avery) stands out from an abundance of memoirs on "leaving fundamentalism." Johnson survived the off-and-on presence of her mother, who fell in love with a manipulative Holy Roller preacher, played the organ for him at tent revivals, and eventually married him. Her memoir reflects an honest, bone-deep, and ongoing effort to come to terms with her past without losing her love for family or abandoning her faith.



In **Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs** (Little, Brown), renowned photographer Sally Mann supplements her story-

telling skill with photos of friends (including artist Cy Twombly) and family in the 1970s at their Virginia farm (including some of the infamous shots of her children nude) and other works from her photography exhibits.



In *Stories from the Leopold Shack: Sand County Revisited* (Oxford University Press), Estella B. Leopold, the youngest daughter of Aldo Leopold, reflects on her family's love for a vacation shack in south-central Wisconsin, and for everything in the natural world. The family of five rebuilt the shack, planted trees, mastered birdcalls, hunted with bow and arrow, and sang together in the evenings.

The family dynamic is worth mention: all five children grew up to be scientists, and as adults, each built their own wilderness shack.

My favorite book of the year is *The Shepherd's Life: Modern Dispatches from an Ancient Landscape* (Flatiron Books), by James Rebanks. It was a hit in the U.K. last year and has just appeared in the United States. A book about sheep, you ask skeptically? I thought the same thing, but the muscle and beauty of this man's writing pulled me in and back through six centuries of shepherding lore and knowledge and through the seasons of this shepherd's life in his beloved Lake District highlands.

## David Heim | executive editor

Phil Klay's powerful stories about the war in Iraq and soldiers' struggles to reenter civilian life in *Redeployment* (Penguin) crackle with mordant dialogue, confusion, and suppressed rage. Klay explores what ethicists call "moral injury" through a variety of voices: a mortuary worker, a combat soldier, a black veteran enrolled at Amherst. A chaplain wonders if his troops are committing war crimes and if he can do anything about it. "Twenty centuries of Christianity," he says to one soldier. "You'd think we'd learn." He fingers the cross on his lapel. "In this world, He only promises we don't suffer alone."



I was moved by Elizabeth McCracken's memoir of bearing a stillborn child, *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination* (Little, Brown). Her insistence on the indelible meaning of what the child evoked in her gives the writing an unexpected buoyancy. At the same time, McCracken sharply observes her own isolation as others responded to the loss. She

imagines passing out an explanatory card that states, "My first child was stillborn. I want people to know but I don't want to

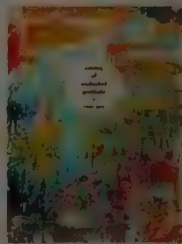
say it aloud. People don't like to hear it but I think they might not mind reading it on a card."

*Borgen* (BBC Four) is an absorbing Danish television series about a center-left female politician and her press advisers. Produced in the style of *The West Wing*, it moves between characters' private and public lives and is earnest about the possibility of doing good in politics. As rivalries play out in shuffling party alignments and cabinet appointments, the lead character manages the tabloid press, a husband who wants a divorce, and a seriously ill daughter.

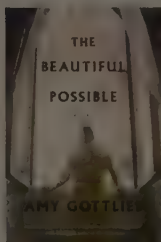
HBO's remarkable cinematic version of *Parade's End*, Ford Madox Ford's tetralogy of novels, features Tom Stoppard as screenwriter and Benedict Cumberbatch in the role of "the last honorable man in England." The work covers roughly the same social history as *Downton Abbey*—the end of the Edwardian age, hastened by World War I—but, faithful to Ford's work, it is marked with tense dark humor and fascinating, uncategorizable characters.

## Amy Frykholm | associate editor

The book I would most like to give to everyone I know comes from poet Ross Gay. His *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude* (University of Pittsburgh Press) is a riotous, sensual, sexy celebration of the world as it is, including its grief and compost. I have already given this book away several times, so when I go to my shelf to look for it, it is not there. "Put your feet up," Gay advises. "Here's a light blanket / a pillow, dear one / for I can feel this is going to be long. / I can't stop / my gratitude, which includes, dear reader, / you, for staying here with me."



If the people on your Christmas list are too shy for unabashed gratitude, I would recommend Joy Williams's *Ninety-nine Stories of God* (Tin House Books). These very short stories offer wry interactions with the Creator. Many of them are laugh-out-loud funny, and some of them are puzzling. All of them are born out of a lifelong inquiry into the mystery and meaning of life.



A different form of inquiry comes from Amy Gottlieb's debut novel *The Beautiful Possible* (Harper Perennial). Gottlieb explores the lives of Jewish intellectuals living in America after World War II. The three characters at the heart of the novel grapple with their proximity and distance to their faith.

Another debut novel, from Nigerian Chigozie Obioma, uses myth, history, and family drama to tell the story of four brothers in Nigeria. With political, emotional, and philosophical layers, *The Fishermen* (Little, Brown) is also just a good story.



## Peter W. Marty | publisher

This election year may be remembered as one in which America experienced atrocious new levels of fearmongering and racist hysteria toward immigrant peoples. This is not the first time fear has caused us to capitulate to our worst angels. The round-up of 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry in the 1940s is among our nation's darker moments. Richard Reeves's highly readable *Infamy: The Shocking Story of the Japanese-American Internment in World War II* (Henry Holt) assembles poignant stories from the internment camps. This work may seem like an odd pick to put under your Christmas tree. But if we are to get serious about not repeating such a disgrace, books like this one are needed to awaken our conscience.

Rethinking atonement theories is on the rise these years, and with good purpose. Previously unquestioned phrases in Christian hymnody and theology deserve fresh scrutiny. Can the blood sacrifice of Jesus' execution, and the assumed wrath of God behind it, really align with divine intent? Tony Jones offers the most helpful rendering of atonement theory I've come across. *Did God Kill Jesus? Searching for Love in History's Most Famous Execution* (HarperOne) is as incisive as it is accessible. Jones, a popular teacher and blogger, provides a well-researched study that covers the field. Diving into scripture and historical scholarship with ease, Jones offers a treatise on love that serves spiritually inquisitive Christians well. I find this book as valuable for serious church study groups as it is for theologians.

## Rachel Pyle | editorial assistant

Rebecca Traister gives an in-depth look into how single women have carved out a role for themselves in modern America in *All the Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation* (Simon & Schuster). Well researched and approachable, the book presents portraits of unhitched women and shows how their choices have added to society.

Perhaps the most talked-about piece of media this year was Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* (Columbia Records). It marries an eclectic mix of musical styles with thought-provoking lyrics that range in theme from rage to forgiveness. The album doesn't settle on one specific message. Instead, it reflects on (among other topics) racial discourse, the politics of gender, and the messiness of romantic relationships.



At first blush, the indie film *Sing Street* (written and directed by John Carney) looks like a typical story of adolescent misfits banding together to put on a show at their high school dance. The film spotlights '80s music and fashion, but the story is bittersweet as it follows students negotiating their identities in the community while dealing with letdowns at home and in the classroom.

To give a great gift that doesn't cost money, send someone a link to Sam Lamott's blog **Hello Humans** ([www.hellohumans.co](http://www.hellohumans.co)). The online chronicle feels like a personal therapy session as Sam (son of Anne Lamott) processes the recent demise of a long-term relationship. Irreverent at times, Hello Humans contains some of the rawest, funniest, and most honest writing I've stumbled upon in a long time.

## Janet Milkovich | donor relations

*All the Difference* (PBS) is a documentary that allows us to experience the hardship, failures, determination, and success of two young African-American men from Chicago's impoverished South Side. I rooted for these boys, cried with them, and felt deep gratitude for the adults who invested in their lives.

Robert's mother was murdered. His grandmother, a sharecropper in Mississippi with a fifth-grade education, moved to Chicago to take care of him. Krishaun's mom is a single parent who didn't graduate from high school and raised her two sons in the projects of Englewood. Both boys were heavily influenced by life on the streets. The trajectory of Robert's and Krishaun's lives changed when they attended Urban Prep, an all-male Chicago public high school with a mission to support such students. This inspiring story illustrates the importance of teachers, coaches, and mentors who can help vulnerable young men believe in themselves and act on that belief.

*High Rise Stories: Voices from Chicago Public Housing* (McSweeney's) dives into the lives of former residents of the Chicago Housing Authority. These stories, compiled and edited by Audrey Petty, show the transformation of a once-vibrant community. As the racial tension of the late '60s bled into Chicago, gangs moved in, violence took root, and the drug trade flourished. When the last of the high rises were demolished in 2011, thousands of people were displaced. Affordable housing projects haven't kept pace with the demolition and the promises.

This book challenges readers to form richer relationships



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and create fair housing solutions. My church, once a spiritual haven for youth and children from the former Cabrini-Green, is now advocating for responsible land use and development. Creating fair housing for all remains a great challenge.

## Steve Thorngate | associate editor

Lee Hull Moses's *More Than Enough* (Westminster John Knox) weaves personal writing with broader considerations of our lives as creatures, consumers, and children of God. It's a short book on big themes, but never shallow—it's carried by Moses's deft synthesis and spare prose. A good rejoinder to the perennial argument that first-person reflection has no place in serious, longer-form writing.

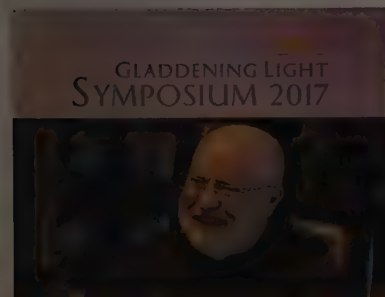
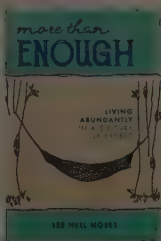
I rarely find the time to write anything much longer than this list, but when I do I use *Scrivener* (literatureandlatte.com). This writing app encourages structural thinking, with drag-and-

drop outlining you can flesh out whenever; it also stores notes and research for quick reference. A powerful tool for projects with a lot of moving parts.

For instance: a script to pitch for *Pitch* (Fox, Hulu, iTunes). As a baseball fan and a parent of daughters, you bet I'm watching this new show about the glass ceiling in the big leagues. While *Pitch* sometimes whiffs when it takes on too many subjects, it pretty much nails the gender politics and the baseball. That's enough for me to forgive the rest—except maybe the jokes, those tepid attempts to morph from drama to dramedy. Not every show has to be *The West Wing*.

While I'm policing genres, the weird thing about Bob Dylan's Nobel Prize isn't that it honors his words but that it considers them apart from his music. So I'm including John Corigliano's song cycle *Mr. Tambourine Man* (Naxos) mostly as a timely curiosity. The American composer took several well-known Dylan "poems" and set them for soprano and piano—without having heard the original songs. The result is fascinating and bizarre, essential listening both for Dylan completists and for those who like him only for his words.

CC



BEYOND SACRED  
AND SECULAR TOWARD  
UNITIVE CONSCIOUSNESS  
WITH FATHER RICHARD ROHR, OFM

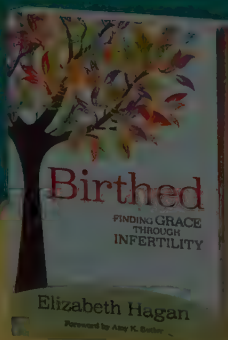
Our world today is divided, bifurcated between the zero-sum binaries of win/lose, good and evil, either/or, profane and holy. Franciscan activist Richard Rohr invites us to see beyond these social entrapments toward the beauty of paradox, a hopeful horizon of unitive consciousness where everything belongs.

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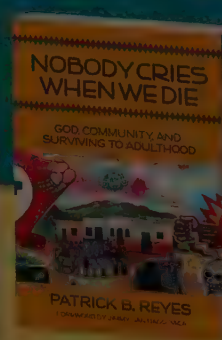
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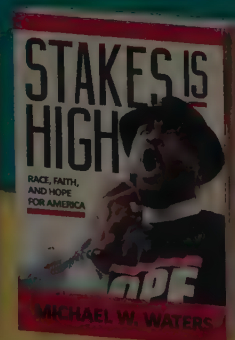
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# True evangelical faith

by Amy Frykholm

**IN THE MIDST** of Nazi-occupied Paris, an independent-minded Russian Orthodox nun lamented that Christians were not equipped to meet the challenges of the moment. “I look everywhere and nowhere do I find anything that would point to the possibility of a breakthrough from material life to eternity,” wrote Maria Skobtsova in an essay titled “Insight in Wartime.” She did not see around her any forms of Christian life that had the “right voice, the right pathos, the kind of wings” to stand against the terrors of the era.

Skobtsova herself was perhaps the exception. Born in 1891 under the czar, she had by the 1940s been a Bolshevik, a poet, and a refugee. She was almost killed by both White and Red armies during the Russian Revolution of 1917. She fled Russia after briefly serving as the deputy mayor of Anapa, a city near the Black Sea. In exile she returned to the Orthodox faith, and in 1932 she became a nun.

She refused, however, to take up residence in a convent or traditional religious community. Issuing a thoroughgoing critique of monasticism, she insisted that she would seek instead “to share the life of paupers and tramps.”

In Paris, she set up hospitality houses for the poorest of the poor that somewhat resemble the Catholic Worker houses established by Dorothy Day in the United States. Skobtsova’s houses offered food and shelter for those in need and served as gathering places for Russian émigrés, which included thinkers such as Nikolai Berdyaev and Sergei Bulgakov. During the Nazi occupation, these houses also offered refuge to Jews, providing them with false baptismal certificates to help them avoid arrest and helping them flee to the south of France.

It was a request for a baptismal certificate that led eventually to Skobtsova’s death. In 1943, the Gestapo raided one of the hospitality houses and found in her son’s pocket a letter from a Jewish family requesting aid. Skobtsova, along with her son and her close friend, Father Dimitri Klepinin, were arrested. She was sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp, where she died in a gas chamber in 1945. Survivors of Ravensbrück report that in the camp she organized discussion groups that “provided an escape from the hell in which we lived.” The groups discussed biblical passages, told stories, and rekindled “the flame of thought, which barely flickered beneath the heavy burden of horror.”

Skobtsova, who was canonized a saint in the Orthodox Church, left behind a variety of writings, some of which have

been collected in *Mother Maria Skobtsova: Essential Writings* (Orbis). One of these works is the essay “Religious Types” in which she identifies and rejects four ways of being a Christian before articulating her vision of the authentic path.

Though her types draw on Russian Orthodox tradition and practice and are not immediately applicable to the American Christian context, they offer modern Christians an opportunity to reflect on the position of Christianity in our time and to ask, with Skobtsova, if we are prepared to meet the particular challenges in front of us.

Skobtsova’s first type was the *synodal Christian*. This type of Christian had been seared by the triumph of communism in Russia and looked back fondly to the era of Peter the Great, who sought to bring the Russian Empire and Orthodox Christianity close together. Synodal Christians brought with them to exile in Paris a strong sense of nationalism that was

## Skobtsova rejects four ways of being a Christian before expressing her own vision.

deeply rooted in faith. They brought not only their regimental banners from the fight with the Bolsheviks, but also their churches, their iconostases, and liturgical vessels. They wanted, in some way, to keep alive a Russia that had been lost in revolution and war. The church was, for these refugees, a national symbol.

Before World War I, the state had appointed church hierarchs and managed the church’s activities. Spiritual life took a backseat to administrative life. The result, Skobtsova said, was that piety was a state virtue, “necessary only because the state had need of pious people.” But such piety had become rote, which made it easy for the Bolsheviks to exploit people’s latent religious fervor. The Bolsheviks attracted those with “the flaming passion of a true religious life.”

The synodal system was conservative: all of its energies went into preserving tradition. Creativity was discouraged and change impossible. Likewise impossible, Skobtsova argued, was any possibility of following Christ.

Skobtsova predicted extinction for the synodal type.



Having been driven into exile, synodal Christians would be able to keep up their traditions only for a short time. She couldn't have imagined the fall of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Putin's alliance with Patriarch Kiril, and the day when synodal Christians would be invited back to Russia to reinvent the union between the Russian church and the Russian state—but she was well aware of the dangers of aligning nationalism with religion.

The second type that Skobtsova described was the *ritualistic Christian*. Skobtsova pointed to the schism in Russian between the Old Believers and the state church over the proper way to cross oneself, or how to write the name of Jesus. For ritualistic Christians, the focus on ritual behavior took priority over other forms of goodness. People were willing to fight and to die for gestures. Skobtsova had particularly harsh words for this form of faith: "Moscow reformed all . . . the vibrancy of the Byzantine genius into an immovable form, a cult of the letter, a repetitious, rhythmical gesture . . . ossifying it and depriving it of its grace-filled, living spirit."

She believed this type of Christianity was alive and well in her own day. The desire to "replace spirit with form, love with ritual" was apparent among Russian exiles. Underlying the desire for ritual, she argued, was a desire for control. The condition of exile encouraged this kind of Christianity because ritual was one thing that exiles could determine. But she saw behind the desire for control "a thirst for authoritarian leaders who can lead a blind and loyal mass behind them." In Nazi-occupied Paris, the desire for "spiritual hygiene" led directly to the abandonment of one's neighbors to the police.

Skobtsova's third type was the aesthete. The identity of the *aesthetic Christian* had deep roots in Orthodoxy. The founding legend of the Russian Orthodox Church tells of St. Vladimir's visit to Constantinople and his return to Russia, where he reported having compared the world's religions and deciding that Byzantine Christianity was by far the most beautiful. He therefore insisted that the Kievan Rus' state would be Orthodox. It was not the theological content of the religion that moved him, but the beauty of the churches, the singing, and the icons. Rhapsodies about the beauty of Orthodoxy have been an important part of Russian spirituality ever since.

Skobtsova's objections to aesthetic Christianity were threefold. One was its fundamental elitism. "Beauty and appreciation of beauty," she wrote, "are always the province of a small minority." She made this argument even though she herself was both an artist and a poet. Her communal houses were places where art, including her own elaborate embroideries, could be displayed. But the way that the aesthetic Christian used beauty bothered her. Anyone who was "too simple or too unrefined" was excluded from the circle, and eventually, aesthetic criteria crowded out spiritual criteria. Certain hymns were seen as having artistic merit, others not. Worshipers become either props for proper worship or "tedious and annoying barbarians, who by their ignorance, clumsiness, and, occasionally, by their personal sorrows and special needs, encroach upon the grandeur and orderliness of the service."

This kind of spirituality brings "ice" to the soul, she wrote. Despite the aesthetes' appreciation of beauty, Skobtsova



**MOTHER MARIA:** Arrested for aiding Jews, Skobtsova died in a gas chamber at Ravensbrück concentration camp.

believed they were too locked into their own perspectives to be truly creative. True creativity is messy and even destructive. "The psychology of the museum curator is incompatible with that of the creative individual," she wrote. The church had to reach the simplest people. It had to be radically open to new expression. The aesthete will not notice, she wrote, when Christ quietly slips out of the perfectly splendid sanctuary with its perfectly modulated singing and goes out on the steps to sit with those who have been "deformed by sin, by ugliness, drunkenness, depravity, and hate."

Her third objection to aesthetes was that they divide up the world into good and bad, beautiful and ugly, the acceptable and unacceptable. "When defending aesthetic values, the aesthete divides the whole world into friends who understand and appreciate his values, and enemies, the profane crowd." Skobtsova pinpoints the way that Christianity can be used to divide up the world into the worthy and unworthy.

The fourth type might have been closest to Skobtsova's own worldview. Yet it is the one that she criticized most harshly: the *ascetic Christian*. She recognized the centrality of asceticism in religion as a whole and argued that eras when asceticism is absent are marked by "decline and decay." Religious life demands sacrifice, and so it always has a form of asceticism within it.



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She identified several kinds of asceticism. One demands mastery of the body and spirit in order to produce spiritual power. People do spiritual exercises the way that body builders build muscles or singers sing scales to increase their vocal range. Ascetics fast, deprive themselves of sleep, order their lives, meditate at length in order to maximize “those forces with which they have been endowed by nature.” She called this a “spiritual naturalism” and argued that, while it is a part of Christianity, it is at odds with the self-surrendering asceticism of Christianity.

She was especially critical of a form of asceticism that sought the salvation of the individual soul above all else. This kind of asceticism strives toward obedience and becomes obsessed with a soul’s standing before God. What troubled her about this particular path is that love becomes subservient to salvation. The ascetic “knows that, as the Apostle said, love is the greatest thing of all, and that for the salvation of the soul in addition to any other virtues there must be love. . . . He will teach himself, he will force himself to love.” But what arises instead is a “certain coldness, an extraordinary spiritual stinginess, a kind of miserliness.” Another human being, whom one is being asked to love, is regarded as a means for benefiting one’s own soul. This kind of asceticism is “an extreme form of egoism, an improper and inadmissible act of self-preservation.”

All of the types that Skobtsova identified fail in one crucial way: they fail to follow the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. For Skobtsova, the second commandment was identical with the first commandment, “two aspects of a single truth.” Each of the types represented a failure to love. Each also represented a failure of the creativity that the present moment demanded.

The one type that Skobtsova thought might succeed where all of the others failed was one she called “evangelical.” By this term she did not mean Protestantism, which she thought had a “distorted and impoverished doctrine of salvation.” By *evangelical*, she meant a “Christification” of all of life. A person on the path of love will give absolutely everything away, including her inner life.

Skobtsova often uses the phrase “poor in spirit.” A person who is poor in spirit does not hoard spiritual treasures any more than material ones. She knows the “strange law of the spiritual life,” in which “everything that is not distributed, everything that is saved, everything that is not lovingly given away somehow degenerates, becomes corrupt, is consumed in flames.”

Skobtsova was deeply influenced by the concept of *sobornost*, which 19th-century Slavophiles had defined as “spiritual community of many jointly living people.” The term emerged out of the effort to articulate the virtues of Russian civilization in contrast to Western individualism. *Sobornost*, she argued, was paradoxically the most intimate part of an Orthodox person’s life. “What is most personal . . . is thoroughly pervaded by this sense of being united with everyone.” *Sobornost* was both an inward path and an outward endeavor. The Christian worked to bring the unity of both commandments together in her own inner life and in her outer work using *sobornost* as a guide.

Skobtsova’s pursuit of this spiritual poverty and spiritual community often frustrated and annoyed her fellow workers. In his biography of Skobtsova, *Pearl of Great Price*, Sergei Hackel describes how she would leave mass to sort groceries or to answer the door and hold a long conversation. She allowed herself no private space and slept next to the coal stove in order to make more room for others, but she would also host late-night discussions and parties, to the frustration of others in the house. She was extreme in her statements—“either Christianity is fire or there is no such thing”—and her sharp judgments often led her companions to make their own judgments on her life and choices. But she believed—and lived—that every human encounter was an opportunity for communion with God. In each human encounter, one has the opportunity to taste the blessedness of God’s kingdom, and that happens “whenever in love we do not seek our own ends.”

Reflecting on our own moment and the forms of Christianity in our time, it is not hard to see the relevance of her critique. It is not hard to see evidence of an unhappy link between an American empire and the church. We can also see cases where ritual is emphasized to the detriment of love. We can see how the gospel is used to separate ourselves from others, to divide people into opposing camps, and to avoid those who have been “deformed by . . . hate.” We may prefer that church life look a certain way rather than delve into the messiness and risk of love and creativity.

Are we more image-conscious than love-conscious? Do we prefer tradition to people? Do we sometimes have an athletic orientation to our faith, attempting to reach great heights in spiritual exercises at the expense of other people? Do we hoard both our material and our spiritual wealth?

In raising these questions, Skobtsova’s life and writings challenge our own lives. They prompt us to ask: Do we have the “right voice, the right pathos, the kind of wings” to meet our own moment?

CC

## Still life

There was a shallow moss gray basin  
set with bunches of grapes.  
The grapes were chiseled green  
with the ripeness of their September harvest.  
There was a pert glazed pitcher,  
black as obsidian, filled with cold water.  
There were six linen napkins  
with red diagonal strips  
laxly laid by earthenware plates.

But no one sat at the low walnut table.  
There was no shepherd or mastiff nearby.  
No, Old Pritchard’s family—bless them!—  
was casting about somewhere below  
for his lean body, his cracked bones.

Greg Huteson

The enduring wisdom of more with less

# Recipes for a revolution

by Lee Hull Moses

**I DON'T REMEMBER** the name of the camp counselor who inspired me to be a vegetarian. I remember only that he skipped the camp-issued hamburger in favor of a peanut butter sandwich, and that he was very, very cool.

Even as a teenager, I knew that wanting to be cool wasn't a very good reason for me to give up meat. So I went in search of others. Animal rights? Sort of, but I've never been much of an animal lover. Health? Many of my meatless meals consisted of French fries and cheese. Then, somewhere along the way, I learned that making a hamburger is a pretty inefficient use of land and other resources. Ah-ha, I thought: environmentalism. That was a cause I could rally behind.

Going meatless was the first of what I've come to think of as my food revolutions: sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic shifts in the way I understand my relationship with food. Another revolution came on a youth group trip to Koinonia Farm in Georgia when I tasted fresh-picked tomatoes; another years later when I read Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* and began to pay attention to where my food comes from.

In the 1970s—long before that camp counselor made me think differently about my dinner—Doris Janzen Longacre began a food revolution of her own. Unlike me, she wasn't trying to impress anyone. Longacre—a home economist who had served a Mennonite relief and development organization in Vietnam and Indonesia—had a clearer, nobler motivation. She was trying to change the world.

It began, the story goes, with a conversation around a picnic table. Longacre and some friends had gathered to share a meal, and they found themselves discussing the Mennonite Central Committee's recent call for families to respond to the global food crisis by cutting food consumption by 10 percent. It was a good and important challenge, Longacre and her friends agreed, but they weren't sure most people would know how to make such cuts even if they wanted to. An idea emerged: What if they compiled some recipes that could help?

Longacre issued an invitation to Mennonites—appealing to their ideals of simplicity and service—to submit their favorite simple recipes. (One wonders now how she did this with no social media to spread the word, no Google Forms to collect the submissions.) She thought of it as a “food crisis cookbook . . . which will work at questions such as how to eat less, particularly less meat, and still maintain good nutrition, and how families can release more of their food dollars to feed the hungry.”

The *More-with-Less Cookbook* was first published in 1976 as a project of the MCC. It's been in print ever since, with nearly a million copies sold. With its recipes for simple, affordable, nutritious meals, and its commitment to addressing world hunger, the cookbook has been a favorite on kitchen shelves for more than a generation. In honor of the book's 40th anniversary, Herald Press recently released a new, revised edition.

## Forty years ago, a Mennonite came up with a cookbook to change the world.

A copy of Longacre's original notes and proposal has been preserved in the MCC's archives. They are a delight to read. She outlines her goals for the project, which range from the grand—to “prepare a book which would have lasting value beyond early awareness of the world food crisis”—to the mundane:

Simple paperback format would obviously be least expensive but personally I do not enjoy at all using paperback cookbooks. They never stay open. Hopefully some kind of binding which makes the book usable and lasting could be found.

She achieved this goal too: the book's early printings were spiral bound and lay open easily. (The 40th anniversary edition lacks this feature; in any case, it is a tad too beautiful to imagine spilling soup on.)

Longacre's notes also include a typed list of possible titles, among them *Responsible Eating in a Hungry World* and *Simple Food for Plain People*. Below the typed list, scribbled in handwriting that reminds me of my grandmother's, is this: *More with Less*. It is the simplest option on the list, and the one that stuck.

The subtitle, however, has changed over the years. The new revision goes with *Timeless Recipes and Inspiration for Simple,*

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Lee Hull Moses is pastor of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Greensboro, North Carolina. She is author of *More than Enough: Living Abundantly in a Culture of Excess, just out from Westminster John Knox.*



Joyful Eating, but I like the original: *Recipes and Suggestions from Mennonites on How to Eat Better and Consume Less of the World's Limited Food Resources*. That combination of bold vision (we could have an impact on the world!) and gentle nudging (it's just a suggestion!) has made *More-with-Less* both revolutionary and effective. The cookbook was a constant, steady call to action for responsible eating, long before it was cool.

Throughout the book runs a deep commitment to Christian ideas of hospitality, stewardship, gratitude, and justice. The call to respond to the food crisis comes from a conviction that we are connected to our global neighbors. Justice requires us to pay attention to how our actions impact others with whom we share this planet. Food—especially good, nutritious food—is a gift to be grateful for and to be used wisely.

But the title of the cookbook isn't just *Less*. Longacre understood that there is something deeply good and faithful about breaking bread with other people, be it simple dinners on ordinary evenings or grand festivities on special occasions. Rachel Marie Stone, who edited the 40th anniversary edition, says that the book's primary conviction is that "it is possible to eat simply, healthfully, mindfully, and joyfully all at once."

Over 40 years, the book's message hasn't changed—and the need for it remains. In the original, Longacre says the project was "born from the compulsion that someone, somehow must prod us overfed North Americans to do something about our overabundance in relation to the world food crisis." If anything has changed, it is that global hunger crises go far beyond questions of food supply—and that there is a significant hunger crisis in our own country as well.

While the anniversary edition stays faithful to the original's message, the recipes have been updated. "People probably eat fewer casseroles and 'loaves' in 2016 than they ate in 1976," Stone explains, "and I think most Americans are generally more aware of foods that in 1976 would have seemed exotic—tofu, for example, needs much less of an introduction these days." The revision also includes labels indicating which recipes are gluten-free or vegetarian.

Recipes have also been updated to reflect changes in the science of food. For instance, many of the original recipes called for margarine, which was then thought to be not just cheaper but also healthier than butter. More recently we've come to understand that partially hydrogenated vegetable oil isn't really better, even if it is less expensive.

This example from the book's recipes points to a significant dilemma in the quest to encourage responsible eating: nutritious, simple, sustainable food can be expensive. It takes a measure of privilege to take the time to go across town to the farmer's market and to pay a premium for locally grown, organic produce. Many markets now accept public food assistance benefits as payment—a step in the right direction—but shopping there still requires transportation and a flexible schedule. People who live in food deserts often have little choice but to buy processed food from convenience stores—processed food made cheaper by federal subsidies for corn and soy but not produce. Solving our country's food crisis requires better public policy, not just better recipes.

It is perhaps a bit much to ask a cookbook to promote



**SIMPLE AND MINDFUL:** Longacre's recipes were a call to action about the global hunger crisis.

political advocacy, and the anniversary edition acknowledges that such issues are beyond its scope. Stone maintains, however, that "*More-with-Less* is a handbook, a field guide, for simple and wholesome cooking and a way of thinking about food that opens one up to concerns beyond one's own table." If a peanut butter sandwich at church camp can get me to consider the environmental impact of a hamburger, then a collection of simple and healthy recipes just might pave the way toward a new approach to the politics of food.

"We are overcomplicating our lives," wrote Longacre in 1976. Our lives have certainly not gotten simpler since then. Even our efforts at simple eating are complicated. I recently gave away a cookbook I'd kept on my shelf for awhile. The idea was good—cooking seasonally—but the recipes were so complicated, with such obscure ingredients, that I never attempted any of them.

I hope that Longacre, who died three years after *More-with-Less* was published, would have been pleased by the book's lasting impact and glad for the move many of us have made toward locally grown, less processed food. But what would she think about services like Blue Apron and Hello Fresh, which deliver meals—whole, healthy ingredients ready to be cooked, shipped in an overabundance of packing material—to your door? What would she think about Whole 30 or paleo or low-carb diets? And what would she think about the obesity epidemic in our country, a problem caused not by too little food but by lack of access to fresh, healthy meals?

"As North Americans, most of us grew up believing we were born into an era of abundance," writes Longacre. "The ability to buy something has meant the right to have it. Christian discipleship now calls us to turn around." Turning means repentance—or revolution. It is rarely a onetime event; it is a lifetime of learning and practice.

**M**y own food revolutions have landed me here: I still don't eat red meat. I remain haunted by those stats about resource use, and I lost my taste for it over years of vegetarianism. I do eat chicken or fish a few times a week. I try to buy sustainably raised poultry and seafood when I can find them, but this holds its own complications—what do all those terms mean? Can I trust the labels?—and the expense often sends me back to my lentils and beans and vegetarian recipes.

To be clear, I also eat far too much sugar, and my family sometimes resorts to fast food for dinner. I get to the farmer's market most Saturday mornings, but I also buy plenty of imported produce out of season.

Still, I've come to see meal planning and cooking as something of a spiritual practice—one that feeds both my family and my soul even as I practice it imperfectly. It's an act of stewardship of resources, my own and the world's, and a way of nurturing gratitude for my family's access to good and healthy food.

At dinner with my family recently—the first time in a week that we managed to sit down together, all four of us—the new

*More-with-Less* happened to be sitting on the table, where I'd been looking through it earlier. One of the kids asked about it, and after we said grace I told them about Doris Longacre and her collection of recipes.

We happened to be eating a generally more-with-less meal—lentil soup, cheese slices, fruit—and I pointed this out. We talked about the suggestions Longacre makes in the book: eat lots of vegetables, only a small amount of meat, and not much prepackaged food. This led to a good conversation about processed food, and we named some obvious ones: Doritos, Oreos, soda. But then we had to admit that the pretzels and crackers that are staples in our cupboards are processed, too. We flipped through the recipes and decided that the Egyptian dish kusherie, which we'd never heard of, looked good enough to try.

The conversation turned to the farmer's market, where we get our eggs and veggies most weeks. We are especially big fans of the green leaf lettuce grown by the farmer we affectionately call "the lettuce guy."

"What's his name?" my four-year-old son asked, but none of us knows, despite having eaten his lettuce for years. "Next time we go to the market, let's ask him," he said. "He'll tell us his name, and we'll tell him ours."

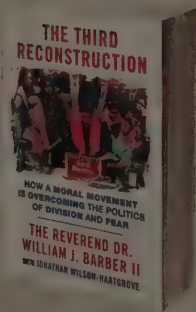
We agreed that this was a pretty good idea and turned our attention back to the lentil soup, which was hot and hearty and just enough.

Thanks for the suggestions, Mrs. Longacre.

CC

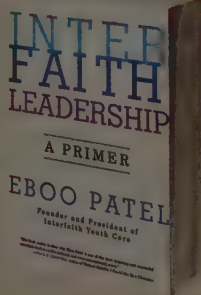
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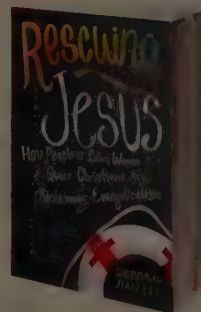
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by Samuel Wells

## What Brexit is revealing

SEVERAL MONTHS afterward I still find it hard to talk about Brexit. Britain hasn't left Europe, but it has chosen to leave the lugubrious, sometimes sclerotic but nonetheless indispensable institution known as the European Union. The result of the referendum was evidently a protest from people who feel they haven't been heard. Now everyone has to listen.

In 2014 the Scots voted on whether or not to leave the U.K. The No campaign fought on the wrong grounds, and there were constant warnings of major corporations relocating from Edinburgh to London. But the Scots didn't believe they were simply economic beings; this was about identity over centuries, not wealth over a few years. The result was close. Having learned nothing, the Remain campaign in the 2016 Euro vote fought on exactly the same grounds: we'll be better off if we stay. It was a huge miscalculation. Those who voted to leave said, "I'm not sure I'm a part of your 'we,'" and then, "This is about identity, not economics—I don't feel European, and I want my country back."

The Scottish referendum was almost lost because of the failure of the No campaign to describe a multicultural society the Scots would be foolish to leave. The Euro referendum was lost because the Remain campaign failed to describe the aspirations of the European ideal in any way the electorate could relate to. For those of us who believe that the EU is a tangible fruit of a Europe that resolved to learn its lessons after two world wars, and that Britain's membership in Europe is a welcome sign of humility from a country that has finally renounced its global imperial pretensions, the result is devastating.

Sometimes one hears the wrong answer because one has asked the wrong question. A few months later no one really knows what the answer will entail. It feels like a drunken moment late in the party when the guest has told the host and hostess what she really thinks of them but hasn't yet left. It's an awkward silence; no one knows what to say; no one can unsay or unhear what has been said; everyone knows deep down it's not the whole truth, and that in the morning it might feel very different.

From cosmopolitan London, it was hard not to see a harsher, more intolerant, less inclusive future for the U.K. Listening to the campaign felt at times like discovering secrets about one's family one didn't want to know—and that in the privileged location of central London, one could pretend weren't true.

My own church, St. Martin's, is a community that stands for diversity, welcome, and an international and generous richness

of life. Members of our staff come from 25 different countries. Shortly after the vote we held a celebration event to cherish and share the pain of those who heard this result and wondered if they still belong in the U.K. But we are at root a community of faith, and we believe that God, who brings resurrection out of death and speaks truth beyond fear, will bring some good out of this confusing and disorienting event.

For those who've lost the public argument there's only one thing to do. And that's to turn anger, grief, and dismay into renewed ministry and mission. The way to do that is by example. It may be people have never experienced or even imagined the kind of renewed, participatory, and dynamic community we strive to embody at St. Martin's. It's our job to ensure that they do.

I pray that the U.K. finds a kinder, gentler way of talking about immigration. But if it doesn't, St. Martin's must remain a place of hospitality and belonging to those on whom our society has turned its back. I pray that the U.K., or what's left of it, continues to be a model of tolerance, diversity, and respect. But if it doesn't, St. Martin's will still seek to be a blessing to all in our country.

### The Brexit voter said, "I'm not sure I'm a part of your 'we.'"

I pray that British democracy discovers a way to vote not in fear and self-interest, but in hope and pursuit of the common good. But even if it doesn't, St. Martin's will continue to be a community that judges democracy by how safe it is to find oneself in the minority. I pray that the church in the U.K. will come to be regarded by all as a home for the outcast and a refuge for the least and the lost. But even if it does not, St. Martin's will continue to worship a God who in Christ is made known in the hungry and the stranger.

I believe it's possible to build a community of humility, generosity, gratitude, grace, truth, and compassion—for which the only word I know is *church*. A church like St. Martin's is called to be a living example of what the reconciling, liberating, and transforming love of God can do. It may be that a witness like ours can begin to heal our country and inspire it to take a different, more inclusive, and more hopeful direction.

But even if it doesn't, we're going to do it anyway.

---

*Samuel Wells is the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London.*

# IN Review

## Witnesses to war

by Carolyn Stauffer

Fire is catching. And if we burn, then *you* burn with us." Katniss Everdeen brandishes this impassioned and defiant threat in the 2014 film *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay—Part 1*. Revolutions exact costs from all parties involved. The fire of war consumes winners and losers alike; this is the price invariably extracted by systems of violence.

An inordinate proportion of the costs are borne by the less powerful parties within a conflict. This silent majority, people on the street, bear the brunt of war and its aftermath. These three books illuminate the lives of everyday folks who are traumatized or displaced by violence and war. They reveal the lives behind the statistics.

"When revolution blows the lid off, all kinds of steam rush out." With this admonition, Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami in *Burning Country* draw us into the throes of the more than decade-long civil war in Syria. This war has left over a million people dead or wounded, four out of five Syrians living in poverty, over half of all children not attending school, and more than half of the country's hospitals no longer functioning. The broad-scale collapse of Syrian infrastructure, the decimation of political economy, and the erasure of civil society have rendered Syria and its citizenry fractured beyond recognition. In this context, "radicalization is better named traumatization."

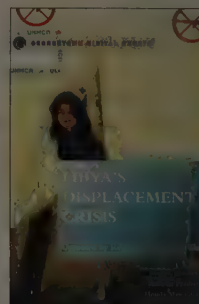
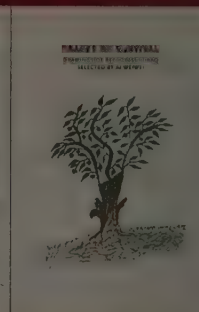
Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami trace the rise of Bashar al-Assad's "vampire state" with its slow and incisive strangulation of its inhabitants. An orgy of Assadist-fueled sectarian violence has

included overt and covert warfare as well as genocidal massacres of thousands using Sarin gas and other chemical warfare attacks. While state-manipulated regional militias and sectarian violence run rampant, external interference by Russia, China, Iran, Iraq, and the United States (not to mention Hezbollah, al-Nusra, and ISIS/ISIL/Daesh) exacerbates nationalist, revolutionary, and jihadist fires.

Having lived through three wars in the Middle East, I appreciate the nuance and complexity of identity politics represented in this book. I also respect the authors' criticism of post-colonial excesses that entrench capitalist elites, militarized states, and coopted ideologies. But the book's vilification of Assad's regime is too limited. Like Katniss's nemesis, the Syrian state is cast as a monolithic structure. Seeing a regime through this lens is rarely advantageous to postconflict reconstruction. In juxtaposition with this starkness, the authors prioritize the nuancing of religious expressions. They boldly state: "Islamism can be liberation theology, bourgeois democracy, dictatorship, or apocalyptic nihilism." This nuancing is critically important in countering the Western propensity toward a monolithic Islamophobia.

The book concludes with hopeful vignettes from Syrians who have sacrificially chosen to lead a change movement. The authors' passion for the courage and language of everyday people emboldens their narrative of Syria's "Arab Spring." One Syrian survivor explains:

The revolution . . . was about normal



### Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War

By Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami  
Pluto Press, 280 pp., \$24.00 paperback

### Libya's Displacement Crisis: Uprooted by Revolution and Civil War

By Megan Bradley, Ibrahim Fraihat, and Houda Mzioudet  
Georgetown University Press, 88 pp., \$12.95 paperback

### Traces of Survival: Drawings of Refugees in Iraq Selected by Ai Weiwei

Edited by Tamara Chalabi and Philippe Van Cauteren  
Mercatorfonds, 152 pp., \$30.00

people who stopped what they were doing, to stand up for what they believed in.

The same words might have been spoken by Katniss, or recorded in the Gospel of Luke.

Revolution is not just about debt or emancipation; it's also about being in-

Carolyn Stauffer teaches sociology, biomedicine, and leadership at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia.



dentured to a cause and inextricably tied to its aftermath. This reality is apparent in *Libya's Displacement Crisis*, Megan Bradley, Ibrahim Fraihat, and Houma Mzioudet's stellar analysis of Libya's war. This short commentary on an uprooted population reveals the precarious security of displaced people amidst a cacophony of competing visions for post-Qaddafi Libya.

While a post-Qaddafi world might seem like a desired future for some, these authors point to displaced persons as the temporary (if not permanent) losers of this transition. The collapse of public order and the rise of private militias following the nine-month revolution in 2011 resulted in the flight of over 1.3 million Libyans.

Citing land restitution as one of the many issues overlooked in the nation's transitional justice process, the authors note that the threat of potential prosecution has forced many previously Qaddafi-aligned citizens into asylum in neighboring states. This protracted diaspora of a critically important middle class has created an echelon of displaced persons who live in the shadow of extradition and seek "invisibility within neighboring countries."

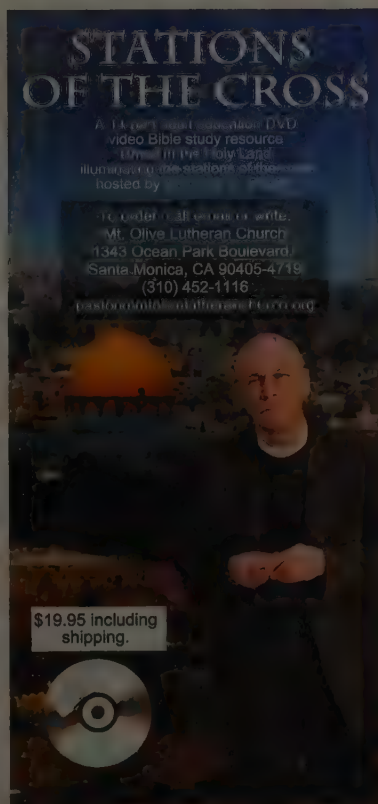
These previously Qaddafi-aligned exiles face not only dispossession, but also the assumption of guilt by association. The question of collective guilt (and the role of "extrajudicial justice" writ large) is one of the most useful issues raised by this text. Also significant are the authors' astute observations regarding the need for more durable "reintegration" solutions.

*Traces of Survival* poignantly captures a richly textured kaleidoscope of drawings rendered by residents of a refugee camp in Iraq. It interprets the barrage of atrocities committed in Mosul prior to the ISIS takeover in June 2014. It's a coffee-table book—not because it is non-scholarly, but because it artistically captures a nostalgic sense of what life could have been like for a generation of Iraqis (more than 2 million) had they not precipitously become nomads. Chosen by Ai Weiwei, a Chinese social reformist and artist, the drawings give voice to the dissonance of dissidents. Their jarring pathos is a reminiscence of security shat-

tered, the memory of an innocence no longer held.

In the caption beneath one drawing, a refugee artist provides this inscription: "apart from the kindness of Christ, we have nothing left." Another indicts with this refrain: "We asked you for help and you did not come to our aid. We were your guests and you expelled us." Such voices, alongside the images, embody truth telling and testify to resilience against all odds.

These books resoundingly call for critical solidarity. They all critique the West's intervention tendencies, whether of the political left or right. "The common thread between neoconservatism and [progressivism] . . . is an abiding refusal to work with the people on the ground directly concerned by the outcome," write the authors of *Burning Country*. They call us to a third approach—one that is more congruent with a God who became incarnate. These books break the barrier of distance and challenge us to do the same.



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## Way of Love: Recovering the Heart of Christianity

By Norman Wirzba  
HarperOne, 272 pp., \$25.99

**E**cological theologian Norman Wirzba, who has written widely on food and faith, here offers a rich encomium to Christian love. Wirzba, who teaches at Duke, labors to reclaim as central to Christianity the bold statement found in John's first epistle: "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:8). This keystone assertion is both fresh and traditional, like a river of life ready to renew the parched plains of postmodernism.

That the teaching and practice of Christian love has been displaced by dogmatic and exclusionary condemnation is not a new critique. Wirzba offers it because he argues that it is relevant to what he calls "the crisis in the church

today," a judgment he does not belabor. The rejection of Christianity because it is seen as a source of pain and exclusion is best answered by the practice of love: "Christianity is best understood as a training ground in the ways of love," he writes. Christianity's most persuasive apologetic is presented by acts of love, modeled first in the words and acts of Jesus but also in the lives of others. Wirzba narrates some contemporary examples drawn from the actions of those whose practices of compassion and reconciliation have been exemplary, such as Marguerite Barankitse, a Tutsi from Burundi who came to care for thousands of children after the genocidal massacres of Hutu and Tutsi peoples in 1993.

A skilled theologian, Wirzba deploys love as a lens through which readers can review the central Christian stories of creation, fall, redemption, and heaven. Creation is God's free gift, and all that exists has come into being because "God loves it to be," Wirzba writes memorably.

Creation is love made material, a view that harmonizes with Wirzba's ecological theology in which God's abundant hospitality comprises the earth's meaning and value.

All theologians who emphasize God's loving character face the challenge of theodicy: how to account for willful sin. Sin makes no sense; why ruin a good and perfect thing? Wirzba argues that sin is a corruption of love and refusal of restraint, as the story of Adam and Eve's eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil signifies. Adam and Eve exploit their freedom and in so doing come to refuse intimacy with God and become ashamed. Similarly, much of the world's pain and suffering comes from humans' distorted appetite, which exploits God's gift of the earth and its goods. This understanding of sin's origins also dovetails with Wirzba's emphasis on God's material generosity.

If love is the fount of the universe, it is also medicine for healing. As the Gospels testify in their many stories of miracles, Jesus is the great physician, healer of bodies, hearts, and all of creation, knowing "what creatures need to thrive." In this portion of his comprehensive retelling of the Christian story, Wirzba rarely uses the term *redemption* but instead speaks of health, community, and transformation, often citing the language of Paul in Romans, Galatians, and Corinthians. Love is manifest not only in Jesus but also in community life, where love is—or should be—taught and practiced.

Wirzba's recentering of Christianity on love produces a particularly encouraging eschatology. Talk of heaven is certainly out of fashion in mainline liberal theology, while conservative and literally childish views of the afterlife have been presented in best-selling books. In keeping with his positive materialism, Wirzba asserts the resurrection of the body (the mechanics of which "are simply beyond our intellectual reach"). Heaven is not a place where Jesus rides a pony with a rainbow mane, but a post-time time of full participation in love's way of life.

Reviewed by Marcia Z. Nelson, who has reviewed religion books for Publishers Weekly since 2003.

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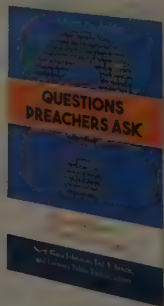
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For Wirzba, the book of Revelation describes a new and ecologically healed earth where God is at home. His view of heaven is an adult view that Christians can embrace rather than discard as superstitious or socially irresponsible escapism. And his interweaving of heaven and perfect love calls to my mind the exalted image of God with which Dante closes the *Paradiso* of his *Divine Comedy*: “the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.”

Wirzba’s other books are sometimes dry in tone. Here his prose is simpler, more inspired, and preacherly. That may reflect the book’s origins in a course Wirzba taught, or an editorial goal of reaching general readers as well as seminary students. In any event his writing is blessedly clear and especially resonant whenever he discusses creation, a subject close to his ecological heart. “God plants the world,” he writes. Wirzba’s beautiful apologetic grounds Christianity in love’s fertile soil.

## Theodora: Actress, Empress, Saint

By David Potter

Oxford University Press, 288 pp., \$29.95

Rare is the mother, I suspect, who would like to be known to posterity only by what her son has written about her—as is the case for Augustine’s mother, Monica. It would be worse for someone to be known predominantly from the writings of a man who hated her, as is the case for Theodora. Although today Theodora is a saint in the Syrian Orthodox Church, to the historian Procopius, her contemporary, she was the devil incarnate. David Potter, historian at the University of Michigan, takes up the challenge of understanding Theodora by painstakingly reconstructing the class, cultural, theological, and social setting in which she lived.

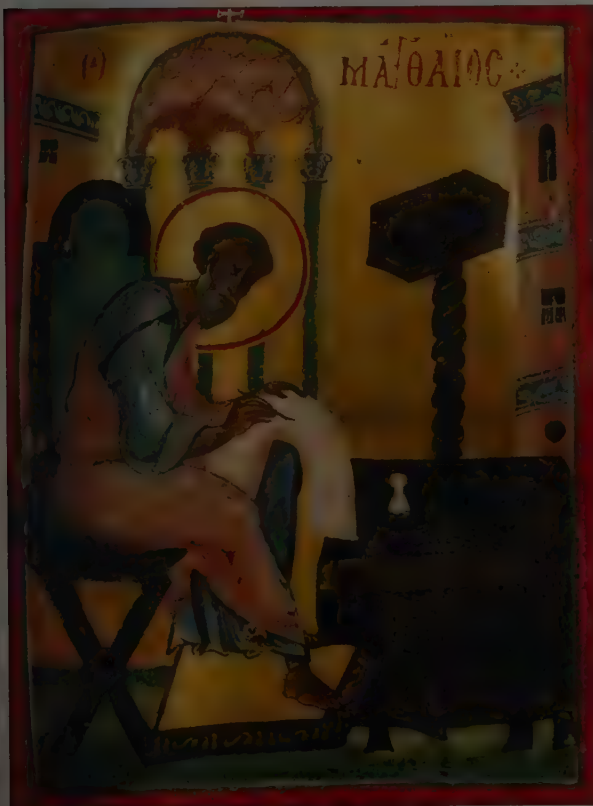
Potter contends that some of Proco-

pius’s spiteful comments about her derive from sixth-century gossip. Other stories Potter interprets as “historical evidence light.” Procopius’s tales about Theodora may not be literally true, but they “reveal what people thought her capable of.” Procopius “tends not to make things up from scratch, . . . but [he] embellishes.”

Potter words his evaluations carefully, on occasion almost evasively, as when he writes that some of the allegations about Theodora’s behavior are “not inherently implausible” but must be taken “with a large grain of salt.” Yet Potter pronounces some of Procopius’s other stories about Theodora “thoroughly believable.”

Potter presents Theodora as a kind of Margaret Cho figure. She was an actress, comedian, and sometime prostitute who became a wealthy empress with “a deep

*Reviewed by Margaret R. Miles, professor emerita at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California.*



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compassion for the poor, the deserted, and the destitute." She was not "a mere extension of her husband," Justinian, but "a ruler in her own right." Her concern for the poor and the weak frequently evolved into policy. For example, she is credited with passage of a law against child prostitution.

Theodora and Justinian lived a long time before Lord Acton pronounced his dictum that "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." For the peasant's son and the bear trainer's daughter, power could not be taken for granted but had to be frequently demonstrated. Imperial power was made visible by control of the barbarians, establishment of proper worship of God, ordering of the empire's legal code, and an ambitious prostitution program.

Justinian's powerful fist was also evident in his measures against heretics and against men who engaged in homosexual relations. Transgressive sexual conduct was seen as causing God's anger and resulting in several major earthquakes. Such "religious deviants" were punished with flogging and castration, "sometimes inflicted with such brutality that the victims died."

Potter describes well the bewilderingly tangled web of Justinian's power:

Moments of innovation were followed by bursts of reaction; the ramifications of local scandals, the unintended consequence of imperial intolerance, spread across the empire; magnanimity clashed with brutality; the regime failed to offer a coherent vision of the new future.

In AD 522, Justin (Justinian's predecessor) legalized marriages between former actresses and men of high status. Potter considers this law "one of the most important pieces of evidence" for solving "the mystery of who the real Theodora was." The law was sympathetic to the plight of women who "left their evil and dishonorable choice behind and,

embracing a better life, gave themselves to respectability." The law stipulated that women like the young Theodora should be able to petition the emperor "for the right of legitimate marriage."

The mosaic of Theodora in Ravenna's Basilica of San Vitale compounds symbolic images to demonstrate her authority. The image of the three wise men embroidered on her purple robe is a reference to her role as representative of the Virgin Mary, who interceded with Christ as Theodora interceded with the emperor. Adorned with gold, from her jewelry to the gold vessel she carries, she displays imperial wealth. She is surrounded by her court. At her left an attendant draws aside a curtain that had covered a dark opening, indicating, as does the niche in which she stands, that Theodora had died before the mosaic was completed. A mosaic portrait of Justinian and his retinue appears alongside that of Theodora.

Imperial power was also made visible in court ritual. Procopius describes what occurred when anyone entered the court:

Everyone, including those of patrician rank, had to make their entrance by falling straight on the ground, flat on their faces; then, stretching their arms and legs out as far as they would go, they had to touch with their lips, one foot of each of the two.

Justinian's law banning the Blues and the Greens—the factions that played a large role in social unrest—was largely ineffective. Potter asks, "What was Justinian actually thinking when he approved it?" He answers, "It might be that he was simply being foolish—never something that can be discounted in any time or place." Thus Potter comments on many historians' relentless efforts to find logic in the actions of their historical subjects. As if considering the recent American presidential campaign, Potter remarks that even in the sixth century, "claiming that, by seeking to restore past glories, one was moving forward was hardly new." The interest of *Theodora* lies not only in Potter's evidence, but also in his skillful historical method in dealing equitably with a daunting subject.

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## The Life Project: The Extraordinary Story of 70,000 Ordinary Lives

By Helen Pearson  
Soft Skull Press (Counterpoint),  
399 pp., \$17.95 paperback

In the early 1970s, about 30 percent of American women and more than 40 percent of British women smoked, even when pregnant. My Lamaze childbirth instructor, a heavy smoker, often held her nursing baby with one hand and her cigarette with the other. And why not? As Helen Pearson points out, "The leading scientific journal *Nature* said [in 1973] that cigarettes had the double bonus of helping expectant mothers calm their nerves and not gain excessive weight. For this reason, any pressure to stop them smoking was misguided and could backfire by worsening their health."

Nowadays only 9 to 11 percent of American and British women smoke while pregnant, and most of them feel guilty. Part of the change is due to a series of cohort studies done in Britain. Even before the *Nature* article blew smoke, a writer in the *British Medical Journal* had used one of those studies to infer a clear causal link between smoking and infant mortality. A popular tabloid newspaper took notice. "Mums' cigs killed 1,500 babies," screamed a front-page headline in the *Sun*, and the campaign to discourage pregnant women from smoking was on.

Pearson's book tells the story of five amazingly successful British cohort stud-

ies that, over the last 70 years, have tracked some 70,000 people. These studies have generated a massive collection of data that has changed the world's understanding of infant mortality, breastfeeding, early childhood development, chronic diseases, and—above all—the deep, ineradicable scars of growing up poor.

Pearson, whose prose is both entertaining and clear, carefully defines her terms. A *cohort* is "a group of people with something in common," such as their date of birth. The U.K.'s first major cohort study looked at a group of the very earliest Baby Boomers—children born in the first week of March 1946. It began as a *survey*, which, like a snapshot, is "a picture of a crowd as if it were frozen at that instant in time." It later turned into a *longitudinal study*, which looks at the cohort repeatedly over time.

The first longitudinal cohort study was led by James Douglas, an Oxford-trained physician who spent several months delivering babies in London's squalid East End (think *Call the Midwife*, but 20 years earlier, when conditions were even worse). "By helping to reduce infant mor-

tality," Pearson writes, Douglas hoped to prevent the ill-health and tragedy he had seen "and perhaps to smooth out some of the gaps between rich and poor."

What Douglas found, Pearson says, was "a country divided by class." In his 1948 report, *Maternity in Great Britain*, Douglas noted: "The babies in the lowest class were 70 percent more likely to be born dead than those in the most prosperous."

But those 17,000 Douglas babies, as the first cohort came to be known, arrived at a propitious time. The National Health Service, inaugurated when they were two years old, provided them with free medical care. The 1944 Education Act offered free schooling from preschool through university. The expanding welfare state supplied free school lunches.

How would these reforms affect their lives? Five cohort studies—in 1946, 1958,

Reviewed by LaVonne Neff, who blogs and reviews books at [livelydust.blogspot.com](http://livelydust.blogspot.com).

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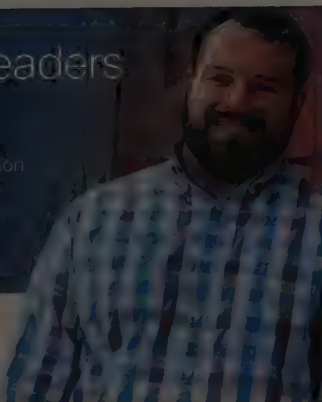
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1970, 1991, and 2000–2002—aimed to find out. A bevy of workaholic researchers investigated families' income, occupations, living conditions, and diet. They inquired about children's height, use of time, reading habits, and bedtimes. They looked at air pollution, schools, single parents, and dental care. They collected and preserved 9,000 placentas and 1.5 million biological samples for future study. And they confirmed Douglas's original intuition, that underlying nearly all negative findings—high infant mortality, slow growth, low school performance, chronic illness, poor social and emotional development—is one persistent factor: poverty.

Scholarly discoveries, alas, do not necessarily appeal to politicians, as a researcher learned when asked to present her results to the Department of Health and Social Security.

"OK, so we've read your findings," [the senior civil servant] said. "Now what do you think is the most important policy message?"


"Well, quite clearly," [the researcher] replied, "the main area for policy reform is poverty."

[The senior civil servant's] eyes glazed over. "Oh, well, yes of course we know all that," he said. "But, given that's not going to happen, what would you recommend?"

Studies that cost lots of money—no matter how beneficial their results—do not necessarily appeal to politicians either. "Ever since their inception," Pearson writes, "these valuable studies have always teetered on the brink of extinction—either through lack of money, or through the shifting winds of scientific fashion and political support." Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, for example, viewed the social sciences "as a hotbed of left-wing ideals to which she was politically opposed." Her secretary of state for industry told a meeting of scientists, "I'll start funding your research when you start telling me things I want to hear."


Despite the government's frequent indifference, the researchers persisted, working long days and often nights to accumulate a body of data that no other nation has been able to equal. (The U.S. Congress authorized a cohort study in 2000, but it was aborted 14 years and \$1.3 billion later.) Thanks to the British cohort studies, we now know beyond a shadow of a doubt that poverty and inequality have dire lifelong consequences persisting from one generation to the next. And yet, in both the U.K. and the United States, the gap between rich and poor continues to widen.

Over a century ago, Pearson writes, the British historian R. H. Tawney made this observation: "The continuance of social evils is not due to the fact that we do not know what is right, but that we prefer to continue doing what is wrong. Those who have the power to remove them do not have the will, and those who have the will have not, as yet, the power." Apparently the will and the power are still lacking.



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## Today's radio dramas



**RECORDING IN PROGRESS:** A recording session for *The Truth*, a podcast that features fictional storytelling.

Many podcasts are purely informational—they are about politics, cooking, or culture. Others demand to be experienced, not merely consumed. These are the programs that go deep into human experience and incorporate music and ambient noise to create a comprehensive aesthetic experience.

*The Truth* is one of my favorites among these podcasts (full disclosure: its producer, Jonathan Mitchell, is a member of my husband's family). Part of the Radiotopia network, *The Truth* features "movies for your ears": fictional stories performed by actors and accompanied by music and sound effects. They are something like Garrison Keillor's Guy Noir radio dramas on *Prairie Home Companion*, but less stodgy. And, unlike the Guy Noir dramas, *The Truth* covers the gamut of human experience and makes use of a variety of genres: comedy, horror, drama, science fiction, and even political thriller. "Santa for President," commissioned by NPR's *All Things Considered*, ran last December just as the primary races were heating up.

*The Truth* began in 2011 with "Moon Graffiti," an episode that explored the question: What if Apollo 11 had crashed on the moon instead of landing safely? The episode focused on the claustrophobic drama of Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin as they assessed their grim situation, completed their fact-gathering mission, and marveled at the "magnifi-

cent desolation" around them. But the episode spooled out into questions much larger than the fate of two men: What does an America that lost the space race look like? Should concerns about safety supersede our yearning to explore?

I often daydream about quirky Christian communities I'd love to create. A devotional community of runners is a current favorite. But I'd also welcome a Christian gathering that listens to episodes of *The Truth* and engages its questions in an experience of both formation and transformation.

Many episodes lend themselves to this kind of attention. "Visible" follows a blind character who receives a seeing-eye app that helps him navigate on his own, effectively serving as his vision. But when the gadget assists him in a visit to an art gallery, he bumps up against the limits of artificial intelligence. The Siri-type assistant can't adequately describe the works of art in front of him. The episode asks us to consider what our relationship will be with technology as our devices get ever "smarter." It questions the interplay between technology and personhood.

My favorite episode is "Voyager Found," from 2014, in which two human-like creatures on another planet find the Voyager's "gold record" after it crashes in their backyard. Their attempt to decipher its contents is delightful, and their

response to the various cultural touchstones is touching and hopeful.

Critics tell us that we're in a golden age of television dramas, with programs like *Breaking Bad* and the more recent *Stranger Things*. Podcast fiction offers the added layer of being portable. There's something particularly gripping about listening to episodes while going about one's daily business—the juxtaposition becomes part of the experience. I'll not soon forget navigating the Beltway in Washington, D.C., while listening to "Remember the Baby," which puts listeners inside a woman's brain as she succumbs to a stroke. Mitchell often encourages the audience to listen to particular episodes with headphones rather than over speakers for a more immersive experience.

"I want things to sound authentic and realistic," Mitchell told *Backstage* last year. "Just like in film, where an actor's look can convey a character, in audio an actor's voice is very important. I like things that feel like I'm eavesdropping on someone." Mission accomplished.

The author is MaryAnn McKibben Dana, the author of *Sabbath in the Suburbs: A Family's Experiment with Holy Time (Chalice)*. She blogs at *The Blue Room*, part of the CCblogs network.



## Faith Matters

Stephanie Paulsell

"I want to access Christian spirituality, theology, ministry, and history to think about art, literature, and the many ways in which ordinary life unfolds. I've been working on a project on religion and the great modernist writer Virginia Woolf, who was interested in how new wholes could be created from fresh combinations of the "shivering fragments" of life in this world. I hope to spend time with the literature of Christian spirituality, thinking about how these writers crafted a path to God from their own fragments, for themselves, and for their readers. I'm especially interested in what it means to be 'lost in God.'"

Read Stephanie's essays in **Christian**  
CENTURY



by Carol Howard Merritt

# CHURCH in the MAKING

## What to know before you plant

Five years ago my husband, Brian, and I moved to Chattanooga, Tennessee, so that he could start a new ministry. The denominational committee overseeing the project wanted something completely different. Brian, who was bursting with creative energy, eagerly obliged by bringing together artists, activists, musicians, animal rescuers, and community organizers. Now, the Mercy Junction Justice and Peace Center bustles with people at all hours of the day and night as it extends hospitality to visitors and works for the dream of God in our city.

That's the edition of the story we often hear in new church development work—how the committee and pastor met and the new ministry flourished. It's like the Facebook edition of a marriage, sharing the happy photos and anniversary celebrations that highlight the lovely and happy aspects of marriage while glossing over the challenges and the rough realities. But like any long-term relationship, the new church and governing body experience highs and lows.

As the years go by, people lose the honeymoon glow and begin to ask more pointed questions about money, members, and metrics. Trust may sour and criticism increase. To make things more complicated, the denominational committee that oversees the new ministry regularly rotates in new members, and they may

have a completely different vision of the development. For all of these reasons, it's vital that each party understand what it's committing to and that each ministers to and supports the other.

I talked with a group of innovative pastors and members of governing bodies who support new churches. My question for all of them was, "What do we all need to know before entering into this work?"

First, they said, the committee and minister need to know that church cannot be a franchise operation that sets worship styles, ministry goals, and sustainability timelines and imposes them on every context. There was a time when the mainline church looked like an extension of a country club: white, educated, and economically secure members worshiped with a shared cultural understanding of decency and order.

New churches rarely look like cookie-cutter organizations, however. A church planter needs time to become familiar with the context. The liturgy and music, for example, may take on rhythms that might seem foreign to some who grew up in denominational churches. And instead of "reaching out" to the homeless and hungry, these congregations grow their own gardens and feed one another around their own tables. Jim Moss, who is starting a new

church, realizes the importance of understanding these cultural changes. He notices that a surprising number of people hope to replicate the past, but he knows that "a church plant 1960-style isn't realistic anymore."

Second, we need to realize that success and sustainability look different than they did in the past. As church planter Luke Sumner writes, "There needs to be a willingness to rethink what success looks like . . . to throw out old ideas about metrics and benchmarks and create new ones." Sumner sees this process as a joint effort, something that the denomination and church leadership need to explore together.

Autonomy has been a past marker of success, but that is changing. Historic congregations minister with the blessings of past generations—the land, buildings, and (sometimes) savings of those who came before them. These churches aren't considered unsuccessful or failing when their budgets slip into the red. A new church, however, won't have that particular history and will need to rely on the denomination's resources. When traditional churches consistently ran in the black and collected savings, we could start a new congrega-

tion in three to five years. Now it takes eight to ten years for a new church to achieve some financial security. This doesn't mean that the new church has failed; it's a reflection of cultural shifts that affect both historic and new congregations. It points to socioeconomic realities too. Members of younger generations have overwhelming school debt and high rent or mortgage payments, yet make less money.

Third, the pastor and governing body need to realize that no one person has all the skills and resources to plant a congregation on his or her own. While some pastors are good at connecting with neighbors, others have musical talents, administrative skills, or fund-raising abilities. So even when the new community can't afford one pastor, it may need to add staff.

These realities make starting a new ministry difficult. Church planters and denominations must come together and realize that they're entering into an important commitment. When this happens, and we all realize that new churches need long-term support and additional staff in order to thrive, vital new ministries will take root and flourish.

*Carol Howard Merritt is a founder of UNCO, an "unconference" for church leaders, author of Tribal Church, and cohost of God Complex Radio. Her blog is hosted by the CENTURY.*

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## POSITIONS AVAILABLE

**SENIOR PASTOR VACANCY**—Winston Salem, NC. First Baptist Church is prayerfully seeking a spirit-led senior pastor, committed to reaching souls through Bible-based preaching and teaching. Interested applicants should review the website: [www.fbcpsc.org](http://www.fbcpsc.org). Applicant packets must be postmarked no later than December 31, 2016.

The Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church, a progressive congregation located in Chapel Hill, NC, seeks a LEAD PASTOR to assist in our mission of "building compassionate and joyful community, freely exploring spiritual paths, and pursuing justice and peace in the way of Jesus." Our church has a strong history of and commitment to social justice in its many forms, such as racial inclusiveness, environmental awareness, and being welcoming and affirming of all God's beloved children. We value and understand that faith is lived as a journey that calls for questioning, openness, humility, and conviction. Worship at Binkley is in a warm liturgical-classical style with elements of diverse musical expressions. After an extensive discernment process, the following skills were identified for a successful candidate: strong worship design and preaching abilities; leadership of a team of ministerial and administrative staff; adaptive leadership; ability to nurture community relationships with other churches, local government, and university groups; and be capable of leading in the spiritual enrichment of the church. A congregational profile, a pastor profile, and instructions to submit an application are available at [www.binkleychurch.org](http://www.binkleychurch.org) under the tab "Pastor Search."

Baptist Church of the Covenant, an open and welcoming inner city church in Birmingham, AL, seeks an energetic and creative person as COORDINATOR OF COMMUNITY AND INTERNATIONAL MINISTRIES. Information and job description at [www.bcoc.net](http://www.bcoc.net). Letters of interest and résumés to [cddean@samford.edu](mailto:cddean@samford.edu)

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*Adoration of the Magi, by Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510)*

The adoration of the Magi was one of the most popular subjects in 15th-century Florence because of the active membership of the Company of the Magi, a lay confraternity whose responsibilities included planning the Feast of the Magi. The Feast was observed on Epiphany (January 6) and celebrated the story of the arrival of the gentile wise men who traveled to pay homage to the Christ Child (Matt. 2). Sandro Botticelli painted the subject at least seven times. The Medici family were members of the Company and were frequently painted as the three Magi. In this version (c. 1475), Cosimo de' Medici is the oldest Magus, who kneels before Christ. He is covering the child's feet with a veil to echo the actions of a priest during the benediction of the sacrament. Cosimo's sons, Giovanni (d. 1463) and Piero the Gouty (d. 1469), are the other two, and the figure to the far left may be a fourth Medici, Lorenzo il Magnifico. The presence of the Medici in the figures of the Magi contained not only a religious message but also a political one. The Medici saw themselves as benevolent leaders and wanted to ally themselves with Florence and its rituals.

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*Art selection and commentary by Heidi J. Hornik, who teaches in the art department at Baylor University, and Mikeal C. Parsons, who teaches in the school's religion department.*

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